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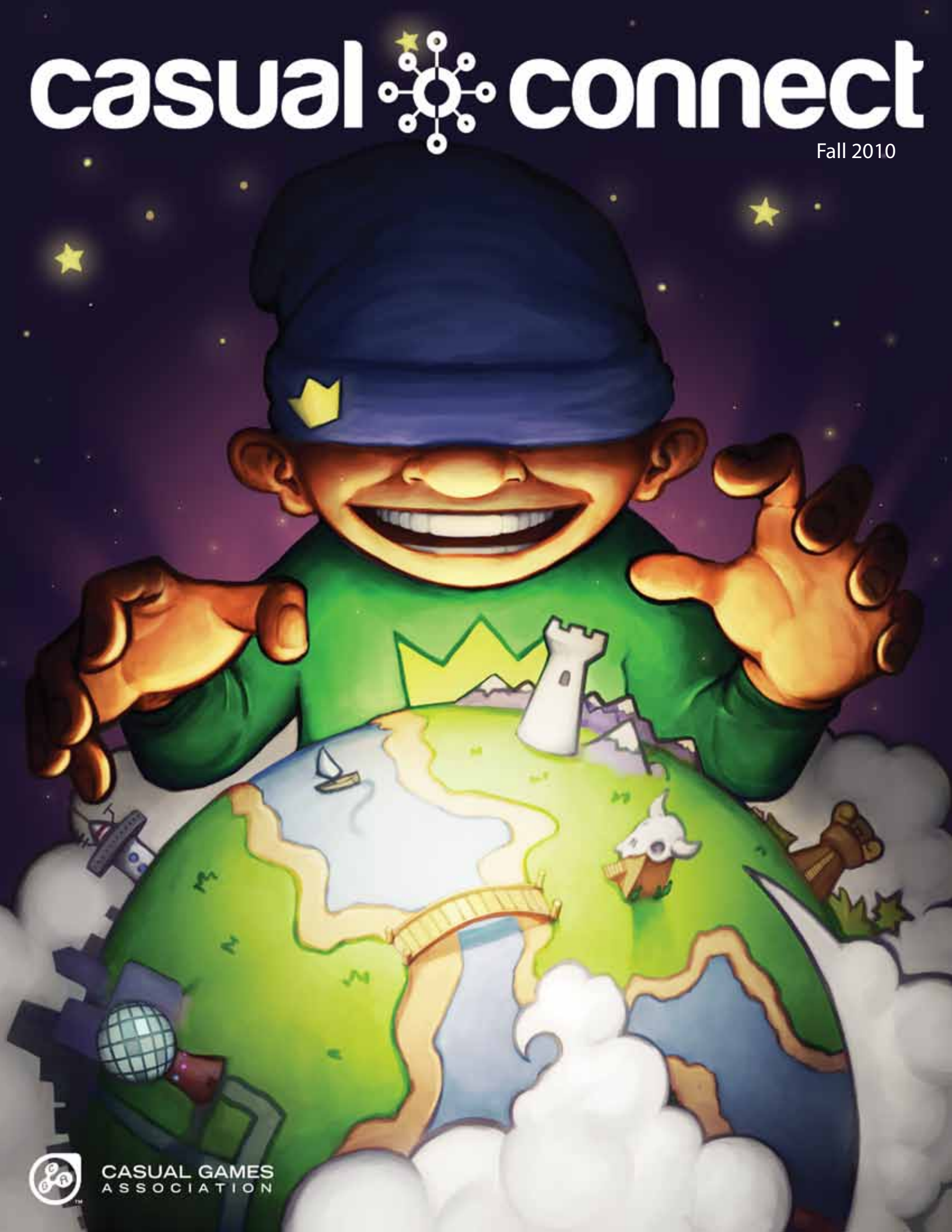

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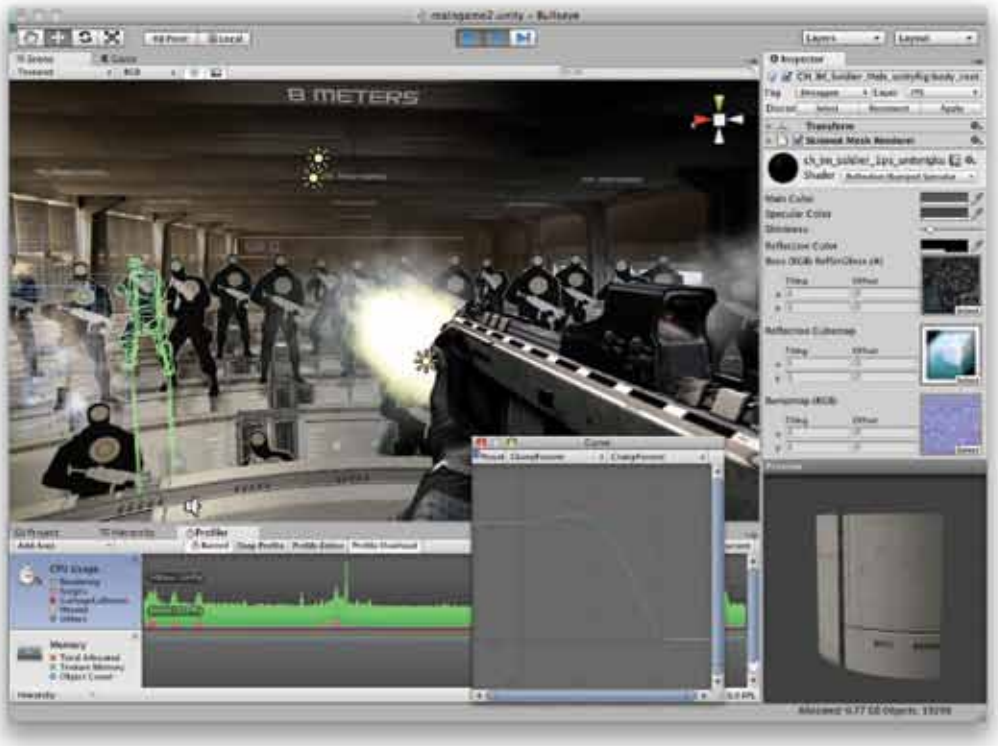

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Casual Connect Kyiv
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Fall 2010

CASUAL CONNECT MAGAZINE

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Letter from the Director

I have a friend who works for a big national advertising agency. They recently completed a set of television commercials for a new client. Two of the spots were researched, tweaked, tested, revised, scrutinized, and rewritten, all in an effort to do what the research said would make them better. And the spots turned out pretty well.

A third television commercial was shot at the last second because the Creative Directors at the agency had an idea they really believed in. The client demurred because the idea hadn't been tested, but the creative team persisted and the client reluctantly relented.

Guess which of the three TV spots was chosen as one of the 50 best commercials of 2010? That's right: The third, "untested" ad.

There's a lesson here, of course. Is there a time and a place and a value for concept testing and marketing research—for business rules applied to business decisions? Absolutely. With so much money and so many jobs depending on the success of a game, you'd better do all you can to ensure success. On the other hand, sometimes it's OK to take off the green eyeshade and put down the ledger and follow your gut. Think how many of the best games came to be simply because someone had an idea and a passion for pursuing it. There is still a time and a place and a value for that kind of decision-making as well.

The point is that as your passion turns into your business, it's a good idea to hang on to as much of your passion as you can along the way. By all means, make the games that will make you money. But occasionally it's OK to make a game simply because it will make you happy. Do that and chances are you'll make a few bucks as well.

Jessica

Jessica can be reached at jessica@casualgamesassociation.org

About the Cover

Our cover shows a portrait of Harold the Homeboy, the main character in Muskedunder Interactive's flagship social game *Icy Tower*. The illustration was designed by concept artist Emanuel Garnheim and finalized by graphics artist Olof Johansson. "The thought with the cover image was to prominently feature our iconic mascot, Harold," says Garnheim. "At the same time, we wanted to show the diverse world and exciting locations you can visit in *Icy Tower* Facebook."

Harold's intimidating pose has a double message: It hints at Harold's plan to dominate his planet while also signaling Muskedunder's plans to dominate ours.

Beware!

Who Said Device Matters?

Namco and D3Publisher Working Together to Extend the Puzzle Quest *Franchise*

by Kenji Hisatsune

Kenji Hisatsune is currently the President, CEO and COO of Namco Networks America, Inc. Seventeen years ago, Mr. Hisatsune was recruited from Uniden Corporation, a manufacturer and marketer of wireless consumer electronic products, to the arcade division of Namco America, Inc. At that time, he served as the assistant to the president and later moved into the COO role to spearhead the resurgence of arcade space—starting with Ms. PAC-MAN *and then moving to other classic arcade titles. In 2003, Mr. Hisatsune created a mobile business unit within Namco America given the growing demand for wireless games. The division quickly became one of the largest content providers in the U.S. and in 2005 spun-off to become Namco Networks America, Inc. The company is now a leading publisher and developer of mobile, iPhone and PC games for mass-market casual gamers. Mr. Hisatsune holds a bachelor's degree in business and economics from Macalester College, St. Paul, Minn. Kenji can be reached at kenji.hisatsune@casualconnect.org*

Gaming Landscape

Today, gaming experiences aren't limited to the home—they are fluid and increasingly connected. With technology constantly evolving and the newest platforms making their way to the top of consumers' wish lists, it's becoming more common for a consumer to have more than one device, including a home computer, console or Apple iOS device. As we move toward platform agnosticism, accessibility is instrumental in appealing to the masses.

Digital distribution is becoming the primary delivery channel, making it easier for publishers to access fans. Mobile devices like the Android and Apple iPad are creating a significant footprint in the marketplace, allowing consumers to take their games on the go.

It's About Accessibility

While a brand can flourish when launched on a single platform, true market share is obtained when a gamer can access the brand anytime, anywhere and on multiple platforms. Gamers should be able to play *Puzzle Quest 2* on their PCs and then seamlessly transition their gaming experiences to their mobile phones when they leave the comforts of their homes. Obviously, not every game can fit into that demographic, but when they do, they have the ability to make an impact in an increasingly competitive market.

While the Match-3 puzzle component traditionally appeals to the casual audience, the RPG elements cater to the more hardcore gamer

Cross-platform Engagement

Puzzle Quest 2, a game developed by Infinite Interactive, is a hybrid of matching and role-playing games. While the Match-3 puzzle component traditionally appeals to the casual audience, the RPG elements cater to the more hardcore gamer. The award-winning *Puzzle Quest* series has successfully been able to bridge the gap between these distinctive groups to reach both core casual and hardcore groups.

One of the strongest enemies in the game, Rakshasa, was inspired by Hindu epics ▶

This game has the elements required to reach such a diverse demographic; we wanted to extend it to the more than 350 million PC gamers, including at least 150 million mainstream[1] and over 250 million casual gamers[2]. Shortly after D3Publisher (D3P) released the IGN Editors' Choice Award winning title for Xbox LIVE® Arcade and Nintendo DS™, Namco worked closely with D3P to make the game accessible to PC gamers. In addition, the title will soon be available on iPad, iPhone, Android and mobile, giving full availability to any of the 5 billion mobile phone users[3] without access to a console or PC.

The all-new *Puzzle Quest Mage Trainer* demo on Facebook has played an essential role in satisfying

1 Intel Corporation: http://software.intel.com/en-us/blogs/2009/03/03/just-how-many-pc-gamers-are-there/

2 Casual Games Association, 2009

3 CBS News via U.N. telecommunications agency, International Telecommunications Union: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/15/business/main6209772.shtml

◀ *Dedicated fans can compare their game progress by using a global achievement system.*

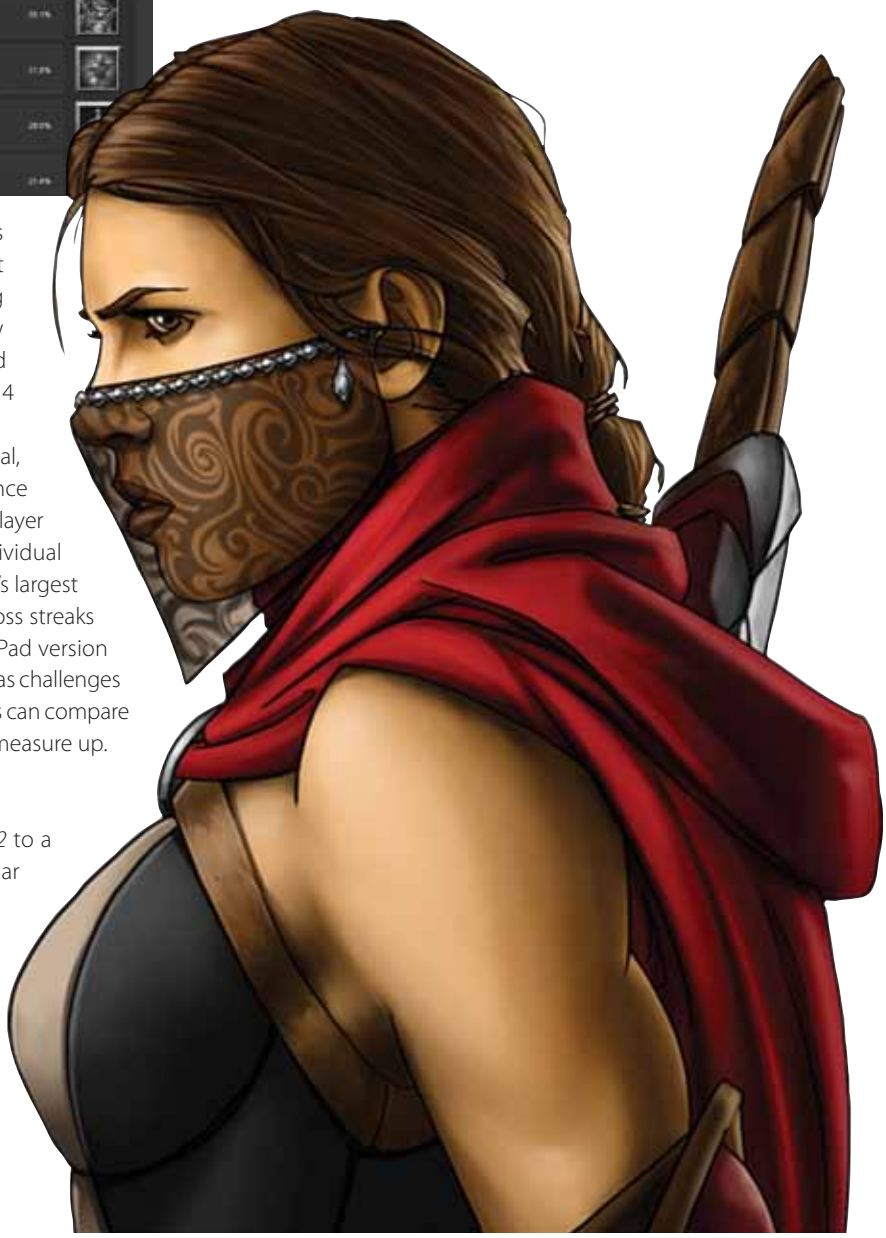
▲ *Puzzle Quest 2 will reach more than 350 million PC gamers.*

the needs of our diverse audience. The free session introduces new casual players to the fantasy world with helpful tips. It simultaneously gives hardcore fans insight into becoming the best *Puzzle Quest* player, with the ability to check out new gems, spells and weapons. With nearly 4 billion points scored collectively and one player single-handedly reaching over 14 million points, the game has proven quite rewarding.

Making sure we engage the user requires established social, casual and hardcore components to create added value. Once players have built up their characters in the familiar single-player mode, they can challenge others around the world to individual battles via online multiplayer powered by Steam, the world's largest gaming platform. Online Stats track battles, victories, win/loss streaks and various battle specifics. The Apple iPhone and Apple iPad version will feature local connectivity via Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, as well as challenges over the network. Using global achievement tracking, players can compare their progress to other *Puzzle Quest 2* fans to see how they measure up.

Conclusion

As Namco brings the highly-anticipated *Puzzle Quest 2* to a diverse audience through the vast spectrum of today's popular platforms, we continue our commitment to developing and publishing games of the highest quality. And with the choice of platform firmly in the players' hands, anyone can join the adventure! ■



Gamers should be able to play anytime, anywhere, on multiple platforms.

Who Said Device Matters?

Namco and D3Publisher Working Together to Extend the Puzzle Quest *Franchise*

◄ *Online multiplayer. Each round a player has a choice: to use his weapon, a magic spell, or to move an element on the game board.*

Gameplay, admired by fans from the first Puzzle Quest ▼

▲ *Exploring Wolf Kennels*

Faceoff ►

True market share is obtained when a gamer can access the brand anytime, anywhere and on multiple platforms

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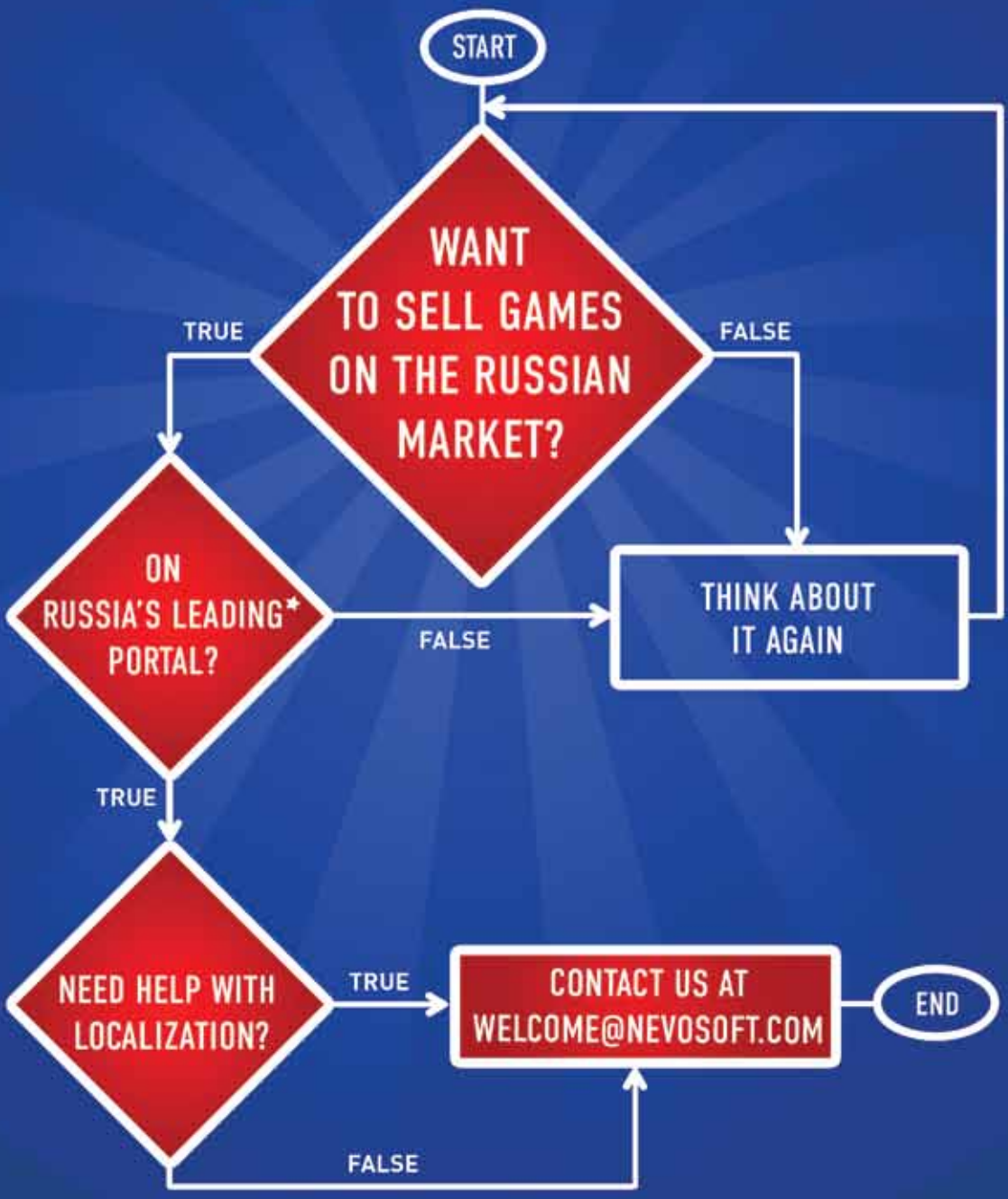


- Nevosoft.ru is one of the Top 10 Russian language web-sites*
- More than 1 000 000 unique users monthly
- Nevosoft.ru is the largest social network of casual gamers

* According to Russian Entertainment Awards 2010

Not Too Mini for the Big Leagues

Frima's Young Thor *Postmortem*

by Martin Brouard

As executive producer for Frima in Quebec City, Martin Brouard oversees the development of all the studio's intellectual properties. Amongst those: the PSN Minis Young Thor, Widget Odyssey *and* Zombie Tycoon *as well as* Rock Paper Sumo *on Facebook and* Big Brain Wolf *and* GalaXseeds *on PC. During the 15 years preceding his career in the video game industry Martin was very active in the independent film industry as director, producer, and general manager for Spirafilm, an independent filmmaker cooperative. He was also a founder of the Festival de Cinéma des 3 Amériques (FC3A) where he worked as co-artistic director and programmer for the first nine editions. Martin can be reached at martin.brouard@casualconnect.org*

The original idea for the entire* Young Thor *intellectual property was created by Humagade, a company that Frima acquired in early 2008.

After releasing *Zombie Tycoon,* our first Mini for the PlayStation Network, we needed to quickly find a new project for the team. We had just learned a lot by developing and self-publishing a title for the Sony consoles and wanted to use that new expertise to launch another intellectual property. To put things in perspective, Frima does a lot of work for hire, but developing our own intellectual properties is how we expect to take our place as a major player in the entertainment industry. We took a look at our different IPs and decided that *Young Thor* was best suited for a low-priced Mini that would appeal to our target audience: young kids with either a PSP or a PS3 entertainment system.

One might wonder why we are talking about console gaming in *Casual Connect*. Here's why: In early 2009, Sony Computer Entertainment decided to reach out to independent developers by introducing The Minis: low cost, bite-sized games made for the PlayStation Portable (PSP) that can also be played on the PlayStation 3 via emulation. With Minis, the entry point is lower than for retail discs or even regular PSN titles. It is therefore a great way for developers to start a business relationship with Sony and get to know the processes involved in self-publishing on the PlayStation Network.

Developer: Frima
Publisher: Frima
Release Date: July 20th, 2010
Platforms: PlayStation Network (PSP and PS3)
Number of Developers: 10-15
Length of Development: 6 months
Development Tools: Vicious Engine

Young Thor had been gathering dust on our shelves for a while. The concept had originally been initiated by Humagade, a company that Frima acquired in early 2008. Later on, we developed a *Young Thor* demo for Nintendo DS with the financial aid of Telefilm Canada. In this DS version, our *Young Thor* was much younger—in fact he was almost a baby. While the DS demo was interesting, we put a lot of effort into developing technology instead of developing the brand. We ended up with a really good DS engine, but the IP itself still was not up to Frima's quality standards. So we went back to the drawing board and redesigned *Young Thor* as you know him now.

The Limitations of Minis

On a technical side, Minis have certain limitations that need to be taken into consideration from the start.

One of those limitations is that the final build you must submit to Sony cannot exceed 100 MB. (A compression process later reduces the actual game size that players download to around 50 MB.) Originally the scope of the game was bigger, but a 3D game with multiple levels, music, cut scenes and voice-over, can reach that 100MB limit pretty quickly. Instead of just four levels in two different realms, we had planned five levels set in three different realms (Midgard, Asgard and Helheim). We

YOUNG THOR
WHERE DID I PUT IT?
DAAAAD! I CAN'T FIND MY HAMMER!
SON! THINK. WHERE DID YOU SEE IT LAST?
I FOUND IT!
GREAT! NOW CLEAN UP YOUR ROOM!

▲ *Although small and inexpensive due to the constraints of developing a Mini game,* Young Thor *still provides hours of gameplay through multiple instances of the same level.*

We hope that with games like these (and some other great Minis) people will come to realize that five dollars is a great price for a good game.

had also planned a battle arena to allow players to fight endless waves of monsters while trying to stay alive and beat their highest scores. We had also designed more types of enemies, a few of which had to be discarded due to a lack of space. So, all in all, we managed to cut from the game the battle arena, three or four enemies, and one whole level that was supposed to be taking place in a whole new hellish environment. Final build size: 99 MB!

Another limitation is that Minis have to run at only 2/3 of the PSP's total power (222mhz instead of 333mhz). This is due to the way Minis are being emulated on the PS3. For that reason we could not have more than four enemies at a time battling *Young Thor*. The game sometimes suffers from a little lag when there is too much action, but overall we managed to eliminate most of it. (In *Zombie Tycoon* we had much simpler character models so the player could control a horde of 24 zombies. In *Young Thor* we wanted our characters to look much better, and having so many units was not really a priority for a platformer game.)

Saying that the 100MB limit is the only reason we had to cut some features would be a little unfair. As the development progressed, the game started looking better and better, but the number of hours invested in the game (especially in level creation) was growing out of proportion for a "small" game. At one point we took a look at the forest/cavern level design and went, "WHOA! That's big!" There was no way we could have all the levels this big *and* fit into 100MB (and keep from busting our budget dramatically). We didn't reduce the scope of that level, but we approached the other levels in a different manner. A good example is the rainbow bridge/flying drakkar level. That level has much simpler assets and visual scope, but the player is still being challenged by waves upon waves of enemies in an epic thunderstorm battle on the boat.

Refining the Game

One thing we certainly didn't want was a game that anyone could play through in 30 minutes. And since there was a limit to the number of levels we could actually put into the game, we had to find a way to increase game-play as much as possible without increasing the number of levels per se. That's when our lead programmer came up with the idea of having multiple instances of the same levels, but with different difficulty factors and enemy distribution. Basically, once you finish a level, you are offered the choice to either play a harder version of that same map or to move up to another level that is not based on the same map. What that means is that now, even though we only created four maps, the player had 16 different levels to play through. Each of those levels came with its own name, difficulty, rewards and enemy layout. Add to these three unique zones with special boss fights and you have a small, inexpensive game with lots of game-play.

Balancing *Young Thor* was another significant challenge. Each level had to have a different feel even though they all shared the same backbone. It took a lot of tweaking to bring the player from an extremely easy first level tutorial to the epic final battle with Hel herself. The game features an experience point-system to level up *Young Thor* to level 99. At first, when leveling up, the player could allocate skill points in Strength, Endurance, Defense, or Magic. The idea was to let the player customize his fighting style and therefore bring more replayability to the game. At some point, we realized this feature was not essential to the game and that it would most probably have a negative effect on our balancing efforts, so we axed it. Overall, we are very happy with how balanced the final game is. There are some difficulty spikes sometimes, but we feel that those have been

◄ *An early mockup of the Young Thor character model that was created for the Nintendo DS demo of the game. He changed several times throughout the development cycle.*

Not Too Mini for the Big Leagues

Frima's Young Thor *Postmortem*

Visuals, while important, should be balanced with mechanics and design.

welcomed with surprise by more experienced gamers, while younger players tend not to mind leveling up a little more before taking a stab at the more difficult parts of the game.

Getting to that point wasn't easy. Early during production, there were some doubts that the game was going in the right direction. Yes, it looked beautiful, but would it be fun—really fun? Controls and animation were far from being nailed properly and the combat system did not feel so good. There were fears that we were putting too much emphasis on visuals and level design and not enough on the core game-play (especially combat). So we took a step back and decided to change the focus to combat and animation in order to make sure we were on the right track. It took some time to get it right, but once we got it fixed and were confident that the basics of the game were really fun, it was easy to get back to working on the visuals and level design. We knew that higher management was now really excited about the game and were even willing to let us take more time to polish it really well. On top of making a game with topnotch visuals, that level of polish includes things like the 50 unlockable in-game achievements, a goblin that sometimes smashes into the screen, an unlockable dictionary of Norse mythology, and fully voiced-over intro and outro cut scenes for added value.

We believe Young Thor successfully manages to ride that ever diminishing zone between casual and core game-play, and we are pretty proud of that.

Starting with *Zombie Tycoon*, our team learned to work with the Vicious Engine. Every member of the team learned to use the tool, which made our production process both quick and efficient. It is an affordable, complete solution, so we didn't need anything else to build these games. Vicious made the source code available to us, which is nice for customization, debugging and profiling. And the support was great. There were a couple of times when we really needed some help, and the guys at Vicious came through for us and provided us with the help and support we needed. They were also kind enough to answer all of the questions that came up during production.

Final Thoughts

Out of its 265 employees, Frima Studio has a lot of amazing artists and developers who get really excited when they have an opportunity to work on our own intellectual properties. On *Young Thor* we had a close-knit team that had learned a lot by working together on *Zombie Tycoon*. We said to them, "Hey! Let's make another game right now and we'll put gods, goblins, trolls and giants in it!" They were happy, to say the least. That team did an amazing job because they are talented, but also because they cared so much about this particular title. We also decided to put together small evaluation teams that included people from QA , legal, art direction and even some of our teenage kids to review progress of the game on a regular basis and give their opinions. Higher management also took great interest in *Young Thor*'s game-play and reviewed the game's progress on a bi-weekly schedule.

While not a development challenge in itself, the general perception of many gamers and the gaming press in general is that Minis are just overpriced Appstore shovelware. Our goal with

Zombie Tycoon and *Young Thor* has always been to build up solid intellectual properties through good quality games. The reason we choose the Mini platform is that we believe it is a platform with great potential—because there is a huge install base of gamers who own either a PSP or a PS3 entertainment system (or both). We hope that with games like these (and some other great Minis) people will come to realize that five dollars is a great price for a good game. ■

A solid IP along with quality design thwarts the perception that Minis are overpriced apps.

Social Gaming: Life in the Post-Viral Era

Distribution and User Acquisition Beyond Facebook

by Jude Gomila and Logan Frederick

Jude Gomila is the Co-founder of Heyzap, a social gaming API developer and distribution network where he leads the company's business development efforts, including sales, marketing, and project management. Prior to launching Heyzap in 2009, Jude started Sugar Global, a digital photo frame brand, making sales to UK stores including Harrods and Amazon. After Sugar Global, Jude Gomila went on to found a charity gaming site (Helpthirst.com) in contract with Worldvision. He holds a Masters of Engineering from University of Cambridge. Jude can be reached at jude@heyzap.com.

Logan Frederick works in Business Development at Heyzap. Before joining Heyzap to market and sell Heyzap's services, Logan worked as a news reporter for electronic gaming magazine The Escapist. He is currently studying Computer Science and Finance at Ohio State University. Logan can be reached at loganfrederick@gmail.com.

Why is social game traffic steadily dropping on Facebook? As surprising as it may sound, this is the question the top social games developers have been asking themselves this year as they've watched their monthly active users from the social network slowly decline since March. The primary cause can be directly linked back to Facebook's eliminating application notifications and deemphasizing game invitations and requests to less noticeable positions on the homepage on March 1. For years prior to March, developers built their user bases off the social mechanics which Facebook enabled to grow virally. A person could join a game he or she enjoyed and get constant reminders to play and invite hundreds of friends to join. Despite initial success with this marketing model, Facebook's non-gaming audience became vocal about the level of annoying noise social games were pouring into their news feeds.

Facebook's decision to maintain a clean user experience was understandable, but the aftermath has left titles ranging from the relatively new *Social City* to longtime market leader *FarmVille* with flat or negative traffic growth this summer. Coupled with the creation of Facebook credits, which pushes away payment providers and keeps developers locked into Facebook as a distribution platform, social games are feeling the pain of being stuck with one method of distribution.

"The mobile space is ripe for exploiting virality. It is inevitable, and we've barely scratched the surface."

It's no surprise then to see developers looking for new outlets to get their games noticed. Beyond Facebook's natural social ecosystem there remains an entire Internet and range of devices that are still largely untapped by social games. The traditional viral strategies of sharing in-game events with friends and inviting them to play have the potential to be reborn as they're carried over to more markets.

Traditional Viral Tools Outside of Facebook: Social Networks and Dedicated Sites

Despite Facebook's position as one of the most popular websites, a slew of other social networks still draw large audiences every month; audiences which haven't fully adopted social gaming as part of their online experience. OpenSocial, an open API alternative to Facebook, provides access to data for many of the top social networks, including MySpace, Yahoo, hi5, Ning and Orkut, most of which support games on their sites. Despite differences in the information provided by supported sites, OpenSocial allows for quick integration and alternative distribution for games outside of the Facebook platform. Still, Facebook Connect offers developers a unified package for creating social content, which has helped establish the habits most modern social games tend to follow, whether they're on Facebook Connect or not. Developers have run into some obstacles on OpenSocial sites, including limited documentation or lackluster support for some of the traditional viral methods found on Facebook, but the continuous API development and broad reach to new users across multiple destinations opens access to big opportunities for player acquisition.

Especially exciting for developers and publishers is the potential for Google to deliver on the rumors of its own social network, "Google Me". The company has recently dropped nearly half a billion dollars on social gaming through its acquisition of developers Slide and SocialDeck, payment provider Jambool and its $100 million investment in Zynga, showing a serious level of commitment to the sector. If these moves are in preparation for the launch of a rumored Facebook competitor, then the search giant might be able to offer a rich enough social gaming atmosphere to attract developers and players alike. Details on this project are scarce, but if it becomes a reality, companies should be prepared to take advantage of Google's hot gaming real estate.

With notifications closed on Facebook and the sharing and inviting tools still being developed on other networks, some developers have taken the liberty to build out their own dedicated sites for individual games. Zynga is the primary social games developer to move into this space. As part of its ongoing shift away from relying on Facebook for distribution, Zynga has launched *FarmVille*, *Mafia Wars,* and more of its titles on their own websites (but still relying on Facebook Connect for user authentication). This strategy isn't entirely original, as text-based browser games and massively-

multiplayer-online (MMO) games such as *Runescape* have been drawing traffic to their own sites for years and have been quite profitable while doing so. Having a dedicated site alongside other forms of distribution allows you to solidify your branding, add additional monetization methods, such as advertisements, around the game, instantaneously update content for all players and reduce your dependency on other distribution platforms if the platform holders, such as the social networks, change their rules. Despite seeming isolated from the rest of the web, dedicated sites can still utilize Facebook Connect or Twitter to log in and share or stick to traditional email in an effort to remain platform agnostic and social among its audience.

▲ *Heyzap increased new user signups for* EpicDuel *by distributing the game across the Heyzap Network of 280,000 sites.*

New Viral Channels: Twitter, IM, and Mobile

Innovative communication outlets have formed the basis for the next viral technologies which will make gaming more social as it moves beyond Facebook. These fresh social tools are interconnecting communication on different devices so that developers can introduce huge, unexposed audiences to social games.

First we have the growth of Twitter as a protocol for communicating, which makes it the perfect platform for spreading viral game updates or playing a casual game in a social medium. The potential is still largely open for more social games to use Twitter to reach out to players in a manner similar to Facebook and email notifications. Collect the user's Twitter account during the signup process or during the game's progress and use for a number of purposes: occasional reminders to former players about game updates, sharing experiences with Twitter followers, and inviting Twitter friends. Some games have already taken advantage of Twitter for gaming. *140 Mafia,* an HTML mafia title by LOLPlaying, gained traction by asking users to opt into Twitter notifications for various in-game achievements. Twitter encourages this type of integration with its API, opening up user information to developers so they can bring more engagement to its users. Room remains for more experimentation on a service with as large a user base as Twitter, and we've only seen the beginning.

▲ Desktop Tower Defense *spread virally since its 2007 debut due to addicting gameplay and the ease of uploading the SWF file to any site.*

Also open for experimentation are instant messaging services. Despite being one of the older forms of online chatting, instant messaging continues to adapt with the times. Companies such as Raptr are bringing instant messaging to games and chat rooms and social gaming viral mechanisms such as social network notifications to traditional games. Like Twitter, IM requires the developer to actively ask the user for his or her IM information, but once it has been obtained, instant messages can reach people when they're already in a talkative, social mindset.

Additionally, the mobile social gaming market continues to evolve and more strongly integrate with the larger social experience of the web. Mobile games, which used to be limited to single-player *Tetris*-like experiences, are becoming increasingly social, thanks to companies like ngmoco:) and Aurora Feint who have spun off their own tools for developers. ngmoco:)'s Plus+ and Aurora Feint's OpenFeint software development kits enable mobile games to include social tools including viral sharing and inviting, achievements, leader boards, and more. Mobile has additional unique viral mechanisms, SMS messaging and phone-push notifications, which can be used to update players on in-game events on the go or to reach out to friends in their address book. Apple has taken notice of social gaming's move to mobile and has updated the iPhone operating system with notifications and built-in microtransaction tools to simultaneously attract social game developers to the platform and take a piece of the action for itself.

For a better view of the mobile landscape for social games, I asked Josh Rose what kind of social gaming activity his company Flying Wisdom Studios, a social iPhone and web games developer, has seen on mobile phones and if he was hearing any buzz coming from his publishing partners. Rose responded, "On the web, social has had a considerable head start in that platforms such as Facebook have fully developed channels for virality. Mobile is just now beginning to see these platforms emerge,

Companies should be prepared to take advantage of Google's hot gaming real estate.

Social Gaming: Life in the Post-Viral Era

Distribution and User Acquisition Beyond Facebook

and unlike the web, we have yet to see a platform that offers the complete package.

"The web explosion on mobile is still in its infancy (maybe not in Asia). Since mobile is the fastest growing web experience right now, we will continue to see emerging platforms that offer what PC web offers more robustly today. Right now I don't think any one mobile social platform can compare to the rich depth of Facebook when we explore the capabilities of 'social'. Performance measured solely on viral metrics falls flat on mobile when evaluated against the PC experience. However, these mobile devices have already demonstrated an amazing level of connectivity (compare the SMS statistics to FB status updates or Twitter if you doubt this claim), and we know the mobile space is ripe for exploiting virality. It is inevitable, and we've barely scratched the surface."

Expanding Distribution: Embedded Flash, Portals, and Demographic Targeting

With an expanded outlook on the possibilities for viral, the next step for fully utilizing them is to increase distribution into areas that are both underutilized by social games, yet still proven by other genres. The Adobe Flash format and its supporting Actionscript language have been the dominant methods for writing and publishing games in web browsers for the past decade. This isn't a bad thing, as the Flash format allows for greater distribution reach with the simplicity of uploading a single file containing a rich game experience. We've seen great interest in HTML5 among potential developers who are experimenting with the graphical, cross-browser and multi-device potential of HTML5. While HTML5 gaming shows great promise, and we're optimistic that the developer community will continue to grow, Flash games continue to lead the browser gaming landscape.

Popular casual game *Desktop Tower Defense* is a classic example of viral SWF distribution. Originally developed by one man in early 2007, *Desktop Tower Defense* grew rapidly, due to its addictive gameplay and ability to be reposted on any site, thanks to the single SWF Flash format. Soon enough, *Desktop Tower Defense* found itself with tens of millions of gameplays across multiple sites with free marketing on content aggregators like StumbleUpon and Digg. One Flash file, which contains the game client, can be distributed anywhere online, and all of the user's data (stored on the developer's servers) is still available for use. This portability enabled *Desktop Tower Defense* to spread and netted hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue for its creator.

Some developers have taken the liberty to build out their own dedicated sites for individual games

This is where the power of game portals comes into play. Sites offering a large volume of games have been around for over a decade, including major mainstream sites such as eBaumsWorld, Newgrounds, and AddictingGames. These sites have consistently attracted millions of monthly visitors, many of which engage in gaming. They've evolved as companies like Kongregate have introduced community elements such as leaderboards and chat rooms to the portal experience, even when the games themselves lack such functionality. Even beyond the most well-known online gaming brands are hundreds of other small gaming portals, which all receive steady, consistent visitors who can be pulled into the latest game. The increased exposure a game gets from being featured on multiple high-traffic sites and hundreds of smaller sites opens many opportunities for monetization from advertising or microtransactions.

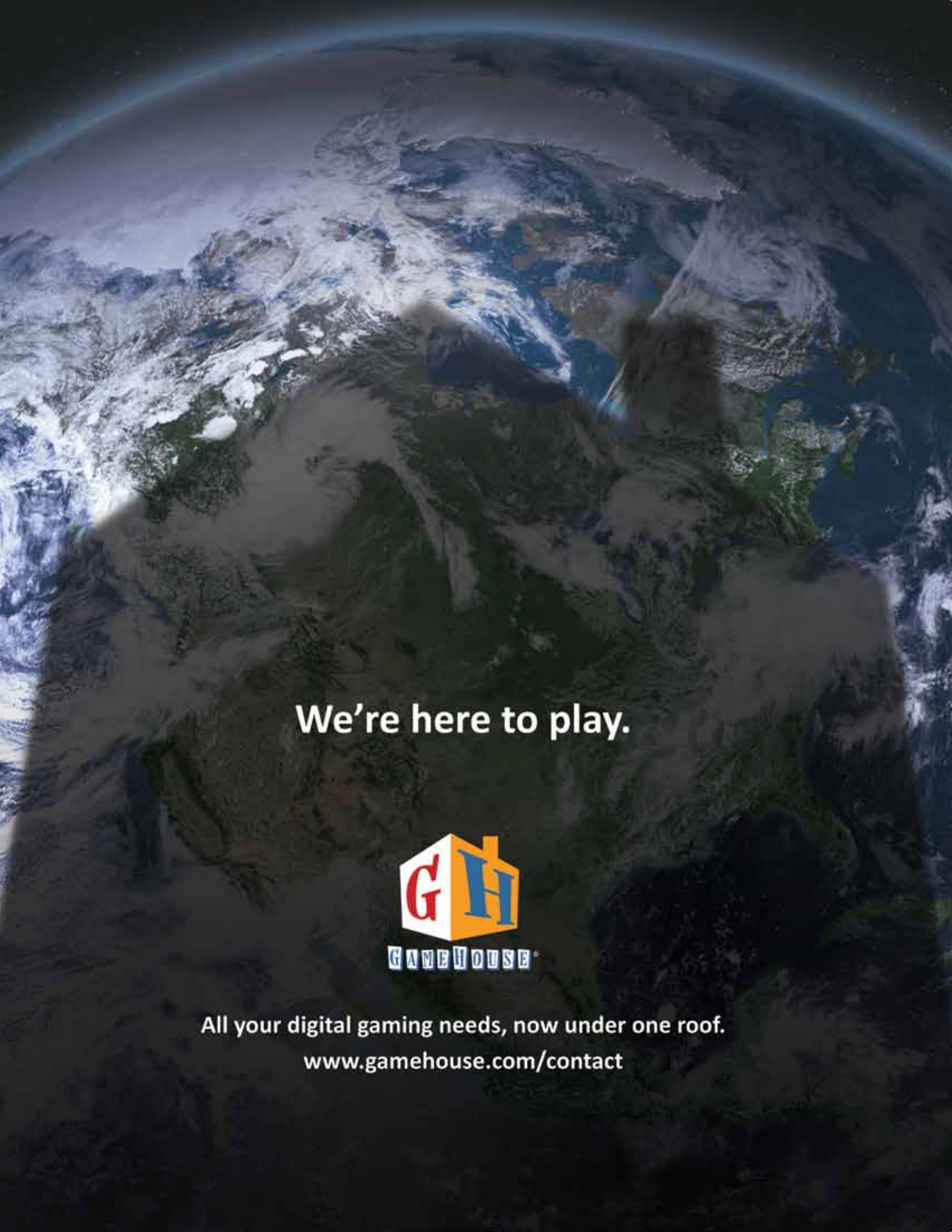
Heyzap has had success distributing games through these channels. One of our leading case studies has been *EpicDuel*, developed by Artix Entertainment. Artix built a high-quality MMO in Flash integrated with the Heyzap API. We were able to push the game out onto the Heyzap Network and increase monthly new user registrations by 400 percent because *EpicDuel* was a Flash file that could easily be uploaded and embedded into the existing design of a website and added to major, high-traffic portals as well as the 280,000 sites on the Heyzap Network.

Lastly, there's the idea of introducing social games to websites with related content. This concept has been most thoroughly tested by casual games on mainstream websites. Big name brands have taken this approach with games on their websites for a while, with VH1 and MTV hosting trivia games, and Nickelodeon or Cartoon Network having simple casual action games with characters in side scrolling adventures or car racing. This same principle can be extended to more social games. Sports sites can feature basketball games which can update a player's Facebook, telling the person's network about his recent three point shot. This provides both viral marketing for the game and traffic for the original content site. Social is a style of online game that can span all genres, and so it has the option of spanning all types of web content sites, especially if the type of game published can be targeted to the audiences of different types of websites.

Conclusion

As the social games industry matures, more companies in the industry could be facing stagnant user and revenue growth if they stick with Facebook, Google, or any one location as their only means of distribution. It will require a whole new toolbox of methods in game distribution and user acquisition to reach the maximum number of potential players. Wider distribution for social games can only be beneficial for developers, especially by lowering the risks associated with being locked into one platform and opening the channels for new users to get exposed to original games they've never seen.

Luckily, the web is inherently social, with gaming in particular having addictive qualities that keep people coming back for more. Developers and publishers alike will need to continue to explore new technologies and methodologies for finding and engaging people online, whether they're gamers or not. Social gaming built itself upon targeting people unreached by traditional games, and there is still a whole web's worth of people ready to play. ■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Cashing in on Gamer Celebs

They Played Their Way to The Top

by Mary Kurek

Mary Kurek is a professional networker who makes business development and marketing introductions in the games industry. She is the author of a nationally endorsed networking book, Who's Hiding in Your Address Book?, *and a business columnist for the IGDA. http://www.marykurek.com, http://www.twitter.com/gamemarketing*

In 2009, Blitz, a marketing firm that has produced campaigns for Activision Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Lucas Arts, published a report entitled "Pulling the Trigger to Purchase." We learned from the report that gamers are most motivated to purchase by trusted peer influencers. It apparently doesn't matter whether those peers are across the street or across the country. What does matter is that they are trusted. So if you're a publisher, that should tell you that the kind of trust you need for game sales isn't the sort of thing you can cultivate at HQ. However, that trust can be bought, borrowed, negotiated, and even created—provided that you can hook up with someone gamers *do* trust. Think of it this way: It's a matter of hitching your wagon to a helluva Clydesdale.

One such talented workhorse is Raheem Jarbo, a middle school teacher, whose side job as a hip hop artist got the attention of publishing giant Capcom in 2007. Operating under the stage name Random Beats, Jarbo had begun creating remixes with his own lyrics from a Capcom game called *Mega Man*. He released information about his work to a few media outlets that spread the news to major gaming and hip hop sites. "One day," says Jarbo, "I got a message from a Capcom representative on MySpace, and, instead of pursuing legal action or shutting me down, they insisted on a partnership. At that time, they hadn't released a retro-styled *Mega Man* game, but in the next year, they released a project that fit totally with my music and vibe."

So complete was the "marriage" between Capcom's *Mega Man* and Random Beats that Jarbo adopted the name "Mega Ran" and produced an album by the same title in 2007. Mega Ran hit iTunes that same year, and, according to G4tv.com, continued on through the next year as the number one best-selling video game/hip-hop/rock compilation.

Yes, Capcom is happy. According to Seth Killian, Capcom's Strategic Director for Online and Community, "Random and his music not only helped to cement *Mega Man* as one of the cornerstones of gaming, but also showed how the game's influence has spread far outside of the original medium to every aspect of our culture."

Certainly, it does seem that hip hop is a natural match for the games industry. For Gerard Williams, a biz-savvy rhymer from Brooklyn, it was a match made in *God of War 3* Heaven. Known as Hip Hop Gamer to his four million monthly site visitors, this charismatic artist-turned-talk-show-host claims that his site, which includes high-interest video interview broadcasts, pushed the sales meter up on *God of War 3*. "The promotional impact was bigger than other major sites in the industry, such as IGN, Gamespot, and Kotaku," he says.

Raheem Jarbo (aka Random Beats, Mega Ran)

http://www.megaran.com

http://www.twitter.com/megaran

First Game Played: Combat, Atari 2600 (age 5)

5-Yr Industry Projection: I see games becoming more hands on, and less hands on at the same time. Games will all be downloadable and constantly updating. I see the general idea of controllers becoming a thing of the past.

Most Memorable Fan Experience: I had a fan write me an email and say that my being a teacher and musician inspired him to get back into school and encouraged him to resume an art hobby that he hadn't used in years. I've had people tell me they've been depressed, even suicidal, and that my music and story has inspired them to live.

Since his first appearance at E3 '08, companies have been seeking out Hip Hop Gamer to help them promote their games or company branding. Williams believes that those who are interested in his endorsement are looking for someone who knows what he is talking about when it comes to games. "They want someone who is unique and can stand out," he says, "so the attention and *cool factor* will help spread via word-of-mouth instead of only TV advertisements." Microsoft, Activision, and Sony must surely agree, inasmuch as their games have all received benefit from Williams' high-octane persona.

If *cool* is the word, then it is definitely something that the folks over at the World Cyber Games' Ultimate Gamer show consider when selecting contestants. Even though WCG provides media training and event preparation for gamer celebs, there are those who come on board already with that special ability to rock any media campaign. A good example is sWooZie (Adande Thorne), who's natural gift in front of an audience has earned him spokesperson and hosting privileges with the WCG. (See his story on page 23.)

sWooZie's development as a gamer celeb shows how talent plus media savvy can create celebrity that doesn't just boost brands but affects an entire industry. It's fair to say that the WCG played a big role in helping him to settle into celebrity status, and that's something well-appreciated by management. "We're aware that we are producing notable personalities and recognizable faces that will have the potential of securing promotional deals with industry brands," says Brewer. "It's not forgotten that we are one of those brands. The benefits from working with our gamer celebs are felt with increased site traffic, viewer numbers, and sponsorship interest."

Brewer points out that, while they've had several male gamers make it to celebrity, there also seems to be intrigue in the industry for high-visibility female gamers, noting (in particular) Ubisoft's famed "Frag Dolls." Beyond the obvious appeal to male gamers (they recently hit *Maxim*'s Top 10 Hotties of the Video Game Industry list), the idea with the group is also to expand the audience of young girls and inspire more serious play.

Even though Frag Dolls are company employees, Michael Beadle, Ubisoft's Associate Director of Public Relations, compares the relationship to a sports endorsement deal. "You want the best to promote your brand," says Beadle. "These girls aren't just models that we've hired to promote games; they are serious gamers with competitive skills."

Beadle says Ubisoft decided to create a female gamer team in 2004—after noticing that a group of female gamers were making waves on Xbox LIVE playing *Rainbow Six*. The Frag Dolls' mission was to play on the MLG tour and interact with gamers on forums and at events. The group includes nine U.S. brand ambassadors who have become public relations experts, holding "Frag Doll Fridays" on Xbox LIVE, claiming top Twitter spot for a game team with 1.4 million followers, and even managing a Cadette Program. When asked the difference the Frag Dolls have made to Ubisoft's marketing, Beadle explains: "Before the Frag Dolls, we had a preconceived notion about how to promote our games. Since their coming on board, we've learned a great deal about how to expand an audience and be inclusive of gamers no matter their level. Through the Frag Dolls, we've pulled in gamers that wouldn't necessarily have tried our first-person-shooter games before. And, we've made the hardcore types feel more comfortable with their identity."

If you take away the team aspect and the company paycheck, but keep the hardcore competitor spirit in a female dynamo, you come up with Ciji Thornton (a.k.a. StarSlay3r). Easily among the top female gamers in America, Thornton is a WCG celeb from Season One of the Ultimate Gamer. She's not only continued taking her gaming skills to international tournaments, but also taking her fame to interested brands like Energizer, Gunnar Optiks, Tritton Technologies, and Gamer Cultoure (which is producing StarSlay3r tees). Game communities like Neverdie Studios, worldsfastestgamer.com, and Head Case Games also count on StarSlay3r's champion appeal to boost interest and online traffic. Aware of the potential for creating income-producing endorsements, she knows her celebrity is tied to winning titles while playing very specific games. However, these "very specific games" are high-grossing *Guitar Hero, Rock Band,* and *Super Street Fighter 4*—which only makes Starslay3r's cool factor that much cooler to fans.

Gerard Williams (aka Hip Hop Gamer)

http://www.hiphopgamershow.com

http://www.twitter.com/hiphopgamer

First Game Played: Atari 2600 pacman—had a lot of fun with that gun when i was a kid.

5-Yr Career Projection: The next 5 years I will have my own National TV Show, Clothing Line, and

HipHop Rap Album. I have a dream of building a recreational center for HipHop and Gaming--a place where you can go to get away from your problems and just play games, have fun, show your talent, and talk to people if you need someone to talk to. Similiar to that old show Saved By The Bell and the kids after school would go to The Max. I wanna have something like that for the community, but on a bigger scale.

Most Memorable Fan Experience: I received a message about this guy who is fan of the show. He was having real bad personal problems in his life and he told me that he always had a passion for gaming. When he saw my show, it was a inspiration for him because he's from the streets, just like myself, but he saw me becoming successful in a field that we both love.

When he started watching the show, he told me himself that it saved his life, because not only did he love watching the show he realized that it doesn't matter where you come from or what people say, it's all about what you want out of life. He didn't want the life he was previously leading. So the hiphopgamershow helped him change his direction along with the fact that we come from the same area. That moment for me is why I thank GOD so much for the opportunity of being able to be myself in this industry and WIN.

Cashing in on Gamer Celebs

They Played Their Way to The Top

So, the bottom line is that the games industry is, in fact, a very real part of the overall entertainment industry, and, as such, it produces its own celebrities. These gamer celebs—many of whom have self-invented personas, which they have effectively sold to the marketplace—have played a significant role in the overall growth of the industry. They have a vested interest in the success of games, and, because they do, they can be quite useful in a variety of promotional roles.

The gamer celebs mentioned here have all represented brands and projects at conventions and expos. They wear specific products, test and endorse games, make launch and press appearances, donate services for charities, host events, create special-interest videos, and actively promote via their own sites and social media outlets. They are, in other words, *trusted influencers.* ■

Adande Thorne (aka sWooZie)

http://www.youtube.com/swoozie06

http://www.twitter.com/SWooZ1e

First Game Played: ET for Atari at age 4

5-Yr Career Projection: Super hard to predict the industry but, I'd definitely like to use gaming as a backdoor into more television and film.

Most Memorable Fan Experience: I was in LA for a gaming event with a friend and he got a phone call. He saw the number, smiled and said "Wow-- what are the odds..." answered the phone and moments later said "I'm here with sWooZie right now". A few more words were exchanged and he hung up. He turned to me and said "I have a friend (who is close by) from Australia who really wants to meet you." A few minutes later, we got a knock on the door, he opens it, his friend walks in and as soon as she sees me... a loud shriek escapes before she quickly covers her mouth. She stares, motionless for a few seconds with eyes the size of golf balls. I thought she was over exaggerating to be humorous until I saw her eyes start to water. I got up and quickly gave her a hug- she apologized for the way she was acting and she just never thought she'd ever get the chance to meet me face to face. That particular meeting really touched me. Connecting with someone on that level and being able to see that kind of reaction, knowing I'm just someone who plays video games and uploads YouTube videos, really was all the fuel I think I'll ever need to keep doing what I do if still given the stages to do them on.

Ciji Thornton (aka StarSlay3r)

http://www.starslay3r.com/

http://twitter.com/starslay3r

First Game Played: Mario Brothers on original NES but I know I played games before that. I started playing video games at around 4 years old or so and often played with my cousins and funny enough, even my grandma, the Mario Brothers master. Most of my first games at that age were Sesame Street learning games so I started playing video games as a learning experience and it later evolved into a "for fun" then competitive experience.

5-Yr Career Projection: I would like to own my own company in the video game industry. I haven't yet decided which route I would like to take, but I have considered both a peripheral company making professional gaming equipment and also a marketing company that would revolve around a team of pro gamers that are media trained. Both of my ideas for companies are still far from becoming a reality but hopefully within 5 years I'll have those ideas a bit more organized and at least one of the two companies up and going.

Most Memorable Fan Experience: Every moment associated with a fan is very special to me and they have no idea how much they affect my daily life. With thank you letters from families that benefit from the Starlight Children's Foundation or the Autism Society of America to an up and coming gamer saying I've been an inspiration to them... I'm very grateful that I have all of these people in my life.

Ever wonder what it takes to become a gamer celebrity? Here's a first-hand account from Adande Thorne (better known as sWooZie):

sWooZie "There was a game that came out back on the Dreamcast called *Dead or Alive 2,* and I quickly realized I was above average in play (to the point where my friends would ban me from using my favorite character in the game). The sequel to the game released in 2004 was *Dead or Alive Ultimate* for Xbox 1—the first time the game was playable online. I started going on 70-game win streaks regularly before losing my win streak icons. All the people I'd play started becoming my PR agents. I'd beat them and they'd say, 'Oh, I'm gonna get my boy from Europe in this room and you're *done!*' His boy would show up and I'd beat him worse than I beat his friend that invited him into the room. They would constantly turn around and bring someone else into the picture. My name skipped the pond very quickly once people started joining the room and seeing this kid with icons covering the bottom of the screen.

"Eventually, I stumbled onto a fan site called DOAcentral.com where all the hardcore players would gather in forums and message boards. Once on the site, I got pretty active in helping to provide interviews and content on other players. About that time, the new version of *DOA* was released (*Dead or Alive 4*) and I decided to play the game a little less. They changed the mechanics of my character, and I didn't like those changes, so I switched fighting styles. As opposed to playing the game six-to-nine hours a day, I played it about one-to-three hours a day.

"I got a call a few months after the game's release from DIRECTV. Apparently they were thinking of turning gaming into a televised sport. *DOA* was one of the games they wanted to use on the programming and my name (along with seven other top players) landed on their desks. I eventually got drafted into their league and that's how my name broke through the online circles. I played for DIRECTV for the first year. I didn't get drafted the second season, but I was asked to be the on-camera personality for the second year. The exposure I got from doing on-camera work and shout-casting grabbed the attention of some of the guys at the WCG, and I hosted/emceed an event or two for them before getting cast for the gaming reality show, Ultimate Gamer.

"When Ultimate Gamer hit, you had Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and other sites like Tumblr helping to spread the visibility. I'd get noticed once every other time at an airport while on DIRECTV. Now, I get noticed in the mall or at Best Buy or at movies with friends from the exposure on Ultimate Gamer. In Australia, the show was on at 8 p.m. on FOX, so the email and requests I get from people overseas rival the attention gaming seems to be getting here domestically at times.

"From day one, I started doing video blogs on YouTube to keep my friends, family and co-workers updated on my travels to and from LA and New York. At some point, I got a phone call from the boys over at YouTube to talk about getting paid for my videos. I've also had offers from game developers, website owners, and clothing lines, but, I'd have to say, Samsung is probably the biggest name I've worked with so far."

New and Notable

Youdagames Studio Profile

Youdagames Studio

When I Sioux Productions first opened its doors in 2001, it was a media company which developed websites and multimedia assets primarily for television companies. Its employees were experts in television and the media business. At quiet times, however, these same people started working on games—just for the fun of it—and by 2004 I Sioux had published its first game. For everyone at I Sioux, game development was a whole new experience since gaming was a fairly new industry in The Netherlands. When the games turned out to be successful and popular among gamers worldwide, the company became a dedicated game studio, and about four years ago it changed its name to Youdagames.

It has now been almost 10 years since the company began developing its first game. Since then, Youdagames has grown to include two studios and more than 60 employees—including most of those who developed the company's first games.

We believe in creating strong teams which in turn create strong individuals.

Why Youdagames?

▲ *The Youdagames team is happy to win the Dutch Game Award for* Governor of Poker *and* Red Cross ERU.

Youda is pronounced as in *You Da Man*. The name is meant to suggest that players will become completely engaged in the game-play. Because the brand is used in all of our game titles, it is very important that the Youdagames brand meets the expectations of our customers. In that sense, the brand name is a promise to deliver the immersive experience that players expect. This singular strategy has kept us moving forward over the years.

The first 10 games were developed by our team in Hilversum, The Netherlands. Once this team was all set up and running and they knew exactly what to do to make the best games, it was time to set up a new development team. In 2008 the Macedonian studio started developing its first game: our first full casual title, *Kindergarten*.

This year both teams were recognized for their efforts. Our Dutch studio received a Gamehouse Game Award for up-and-coming developer for its games *Youda Farmer* and *Youda Sushi Chef*. Our Macedonian studio was likewise honored for its title *Youda Marina*.

▲ Youda Farmer*: Game screenshot and characters.* ►

How We Work

Because we build all of our games in Flash, we have the advantage of having online demos for every game we make. This means our games can be published by big online gaming sites like Miniclip and networks like the Dutch Spil games. We also make a point to release Mac versions of our games together with the Windows version.

One game we will always be very proud of is *Governor of Poker,* which received the Dutch Game Award for best online game in 2008. We believe it is one of the most unique casual games available—the first casual poker game, embraced by millions of players worldwide. When we introduced the iPhone version last year, it reached number one on the Dutch app charts and stayed there for months. Its popularity was not limited to the Netherlands, however. In fact, the game reached the top 10 in markets all over the world. When we released *Governor of Poker 2* earlier this year, we achieved an incredible conversion rate of 45 percent. If you visited our Governor of Poker Saloon at Casual Connect 2010 in Hamburg, you may have become a convert as well.

Plaque from Dutch Game Awards 2008

Items from the game: **Governor of Poker**

What Makes Youdagames Different

It is hard to tell what makes us different from others since we do not know exactly how other developers work. So we'll tell you what we're like and you can decide for yourself whether we're different or not.

At Youdagames, we don't focus on creating strong individuals. Rather, we believe in creating strong teams, which in turn create strong individuals. Thus, all employees are responsible team players who do their jobs without much guidance. This independence stimulates creativity and creates good teams. Each member of a development team pushes his colleagues to a higher level in a way that brings out the best in everyone.

Although the market is constantly moving, we know where we stand and where we are going. Shortly we will enter the social area, enlarge our presence on the iPhone/iPad, increase our network and website, even as we continue to create great IP. Meanwhile, we are working to exploit our best IP—*Governor of Poker*—in a new, highly-profitable way.

Youdagames Around the World

In the last two years, our network of distribution partners has grown rapidly. Most of our games can be found on all major download and online portals. Because all of our games are made in Flash, our online network is as important as our distribution partners in delivering our download games. Consequently, when a game is launched, we work hard to deliver to every partner the versions they ask for even though sometimes it's hard to comply with every request. With a more complex industry, more competition, new platforms, new entrants, and new monetizing strategies, it's becoming harder to fulfill all wishes (potential) partners may have. Still we continue to add new partnerships and try to find new ways to monetize our games in order to keep our business growing.

Our website has also grown in the last few years, largely due to a change in our visitors. Adding visitors doesn't make sense when those visitors do not buy your games, so we set about transforming our young, free, online audience to more of a female, casual game audience. And that meant changing our free, online games portal into a mixed online and download portal, where our main focus is on downloadable games. Our portal had to go through many changes to get to this point—not only for our own games, but also for the games of partner developers who now publish on the Youdagames website. The result: Now more and more people come to our website to play and buy fun casual games.

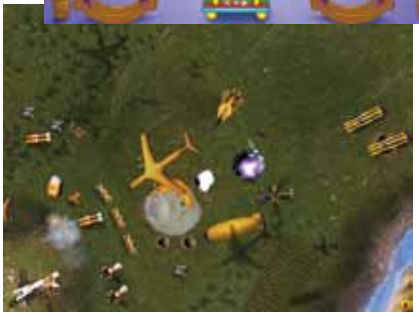
In order to add to the site's appeal, in the last year we gave the site a whole new design and layout while adding new features like Twitter and Facebook applications. Recently we launched Dutch, German, and French versions of the site as well. Even so, there are still lots of improvements to make. We realize that the casual game audience has a lot to choose from, so you always need to stay on top of it. When one project ends, the next one starts.

TOP 10 Bestsellers (September 2010)		
#	Game title	Release Date
1	*Governor of Poker*	June 2008
2	*Youda Legend: Amsterdam*	June 2009
3	*Youda Farmer*	January 2009
4	*Kindergarten*	July 2007
5	*Youda Sushi Chef*	June 2009
6	*Youda Camper*	June 2007
7	*Youda Marina*	May 2009
8	*Youda Legend: Golden Bird*	December 2009
9	*Governor of Poker 2*	June 2010
10	*Youda Survivor*	August 2010

Marketing

The Youdagames marketing team is responsible for broadening our exposure within the casual games community, including appearances at conferences around the world. Casual Connect still offers the most important promotional gatherings inasmuch as it gives us three opportunities each year to meet all of our international partners and find new partners to work with. These conferences represent a great way of promoting our games and brand.

After all, the Youdagames brand is very important to us. People now look for Youda games and talk about them on forums and game sites. As a result, we cannot afford any mistakes, nor do we ever intend to develop low quality games that might otherwise diminish the Youda brand. Luckily, we have an extraordinary, dedicated and experienced team working on our games—so the future of the brand is in very good hands. ■



Game screenshots. ▶ Top: **Kindergarten,** *bottom:* **Final Fortress**

Moms Just Wanna Have Fun

How Women Over 35 Are Reshaping the Casual Gaming Landscape

by Owais Farooqui

Owais Farooqui heads King.com in North America and is responsible for partnerships with such media companies as NBC, CBS, Yahoo!, Real Networks and Lifetime. Prior to King.com, Owais was Senior Director, Marketing at Knowledge Adventure, which specializes in adventure-based 3D virtual worlds for kids; and Senior Director Marketing at Academy123, which was acquired by Discovery Communications. Owais can be reached at owais.farooqui@casualconnect.org

It's official: June Cleaver is a gamer.

What might have been initially viewed as an anomaly is the ever-growing role that women and mothers play in the popularity of casual games. As much as casual games appeal to an older demographic, they are just as popular with both female players and mothers.

The average social gamer is a 43-year-old woman, according to a 2010 Info Solutions Group study sponsored by PopCap, the creator of such popular social games as *Insaniquarium* and *Bejeweled*. At King.com, which has long targeted female gamers, two thirds of its 25 million unique users are women over the age of 35.

Part of the appeal of online games is their accessibility, explained aficionado Kay Workman, 47, of Tacoma, Washington. A one-time corporate-sponsored pool player, Workman has found that even in her multi-tasking life as a mom, she can find an outlet for competition through online games.

Manufacturers, marketers and game developers are lining up to find, understand and ultimately woo Mom

Whether she's balancing her checkbook, working on her husband's web site for his business or simply needing a break from her busy schedule, the mother of four can sneak in a few online games any time of the day.

"That's the big draw of online games," said Workman, a retail clerk for the Washington State Liquor Control Board. "And I can play with the same people I actually used to play against in pool. It's not like we're going to head down to the bar with our kids in tow and shoot a game."

With the availability of games on their computers or mobile devices at any time—and with the emergence of such Facebook game applications as *FarmVille* and *Funflow*—the console games are a non-factor for many mothers. Much of the appeal of social games is that they are playable for short periods of time. It also doesn't hurt that this is a largely free entertainment form at a time when the economy remains uncertain.

The role of parent is also a factor for many women eager to safeguard their game-playing offspring from titles with violent or inappropriate subject matter. As a result of having this concern satisfied, many moms now see online games as a viable family activity, as well as a means to stay in touch with their children.

Linda Gaden, 50, of Bonney Lake, Washington, initially took to online games after she became aware of objectionable material in console games—something she wanted to protect her kids from. She was also cautious about having her children spend more time on their computers, especially with the possible threat of computer stalkers. On several occasions in the '90s, adult men interested in dating her then 16-year-old daughter, whom they had met in online chat rooms, came knocking at Gaden's door. As a result, Gaden schooled herself in computers and online gaming options, becoming a diehard fan in the process. She counts such titles as *Amazon Speed, Bacteria Hysteria* and *Hens Defense* among her online faves and has even moved on to playing *Doodle Jump* on her iPhone.

Though her four children at home, ranging in age from 12 to 17, are usually more interested in playing *Mario Kart* on the Wii, at least one of her kids indulges in Facebook games "every chance he gets," she said.

"This summer, we allowed them to play two hours a day on their Xbox and two hours a day of gaming types of things on their computer," Gaden said. "If they are playing their games, I need to know what the games are."

Many moms looking to stay connected with friends and family have also used games as a way to keep in touch. The dedicated casual gamers routinely build a network of friends, developing a community of fellow players with whom they compete on gaming sites. Workman has even cultivated

offline friendships with fellow players and visited a gaming pal who lives just across the U.S. border in Victoria, British Columbia.

Kay Workman (left) and Linda Gaden (right): Moms, who want to have fun!

Facebook games are increasingly playing a part in bringing women and moms together and strengthening offline ties in the process. Some 68 percent of women are more likely to play social games with their real-world friends, while 46 percent use them as a way to interact with relatives, according to the Info Solutions Group study. "With more than 80 percent of social gamers stating that playing social games strengthens their relationship with friends, family and colleagues, social gaming reinforces the core appeal of social networks," said Robin Boyar of Thinktank Research.

Moms, who are often the primary decision makers in households, play a pivotal role in how their children spend their time and money on video games. With an excess of 83 million mothers in the U.S. wielding nearly $2.1 trillion in spending power, it's no surprise that manufacturers, marketers and game developers are lining up to find, understand and ultimately woo Mom.

Those "deciders" are having an even greater impact on how playing games fits into a hierarchy of online use. Of the top 10 online activities for moms, playing games outranks shopping for themselves or their children, planning travel or researching healthcare information. At this rate, online games are projected to become a pastime enjoyed by a majority of the population.

A longtime online gamer, Workman estimates that she has been playing computer games for 16 years – she started with text-based games – and casual games since they first came on the scene.

"As more women and moms turn to games, whether on mobile, online or through social networks, they will continue to have an even greater influence," Workman said.

"I am just finding out, now that I am on Facebook, that everybody's parent is on Facebook," Workman said. "I thought it was my dirty little secret, that I played online games. But if you connect to Facebook, that's where everybody is. Moms are out there in force!" ■

Some 68 percent of women are more likely to play social games with their real-world friends, while 46 percent use them as a way to interact with relatives.

The Trends Shaking Up the Games Industry

A Fireside Chat with Dean Takahashi

Interview by Jussi Laakkonen, founder & CEO of Applifier, a cross-promotion network for social games.

As the lead games journalist for the highly respected VentureBeat, Dean Takahashi covers the games industry's hottest new startups and the most exciting initiatives of the big industry players. He has a unique vantage point to how the latest trends are changing the whole industry.

Dean Takahashi

Dean is lead writer for GamesBeat at VentureBeat. He covers video games, security, hardware, chips and a variety of other subjects. Dean previously worked at the San Jose Mercury News, The Wall Street Journal, The Red Herring, The Los Angeles Times, The Orange County Register *and* The Dallas Times Herald. *He is the author of two books:* Opening the Xbox: Inside Microsoft's Plan to Unleash an Entertainment Revolution; *and* The Xbox 360 Uncloaked. the Real Story Behind Microsoft's Next-Generation Video Game Console. *Follow him on Twitter at @deantak, and follow VentureBeat on Twitter at @venturebeat.*

What can you tell us about your background in games journalism?

I was an English major in college and played lots of games (such as *Zaxxon*) in the arcades while I should have been studying. I went on to get a master's degree in journalism and then became a newspaper journalist, starting in 1988 at the *Dallas Times Herald*. There I started covering tech news. I picked up the games beat at the *Wall Street Journal* in 1996. They gave the beat to me because I was the youngest guy in the office and I was the only one who played games. I had fun translating games such as *Quake* and *Warbirds* so that parents could understand what the fuss was all about. I have been reviewing games and writing business stories about tech companies ever since. I've also enjoyed covering gamers as a subculture within the larger techno culture. More than 15 years later, covering games is still my favorite part of covering technology news. To do it well, I believe you have to play games and immerse yourself in the culture. I also cover chips, hardware, Apple and security. Theoretically, that larger coverage helps me cover games better and gives me a unique perspective on the business, technology, and user perspectives. As many game journalists say, I still can't believe I get paid to play games.

Game developers are spreading to new platforms because they're chasing the users, who want to play their games anytime and anywhere.

It's easy to forget how the Web has disrupted the overall entertainment industry. Magazines, TV shows and movies have become instantly accessible and nearly free. Social games were the first to fully embrace this transition to 100% browser-based delivery in games. What's next for games? Will the likes of Chrome Web Store, WebGL and Gaikai make the browser the standard distribution channel for games?

Games will scale up and scale out. That's jargon and I hate jargon. But it fits. Games are scaling up. That is, they're growing fast on platforms such as Facebook, where there is very little friction

OnLive is challenging the retail/disc based console and PC business with instant on, streaming games. ▶

▲ Dance Central *from Harmonix is the most exciting of the launch games for Kinect and turns your living room into the hottest dance club.*

standing in the way of spreading games from user to user. The platform has more than 500 million users and its top game, *FarmVille*, is played by more than 62 million monthly active users (people who log in at least once a month). If you launch a game on Facebook, it is quite possible that you could reach a far larger audience than most games have ever done in the past. The free-to-play model is enabling that to happen. The games are free, but users pay real money in small micro-transactions for virtual currency to trade for virtual goods such as fuel for a tractor in *FarmVille*. When you launch games in this way, you have a chance to reach the masses.

That was pretty much the story of 2009, when U.S. virtual goods sales grossed one billion dollars (according to Inside Network) on the success of Facebook games. Now we are in the midst of scaling out. The successful social games are now spreading to other platforms. Apple now has a free-to-play platform for the iPhone, which allows in-app purchases. Japan's mobile social networks are attracting the likes of Zynga and CrowdStar. Heyzap and hi5 are enabling Facebook developers to adapt their games to the larger Web. Game developers are spreading to new platforms because they're chasing the users, who want to play their games anytime and anywhere. While the core console business may be contracting, the wider game industry is still expanding quickly on many fronts.

That brings us to the subject of digital distribution and startups such as Gaikai, Otoy and OnLive. Those companies are expanding and are hoping that the browser—which is about as free of financial friction as you can get—will become the ultimate game delivery platform. If you can get decent apps on your Internet-connected TV's Web browser, do you need console games? For now, it's clear that the quality of console games will far outshine whatever can be done in an app. But one day that might change.

The massive distribution through social networks has helped individual games reach tens of millions of players, which would have been a completely ludicrous thought just three years ago. Casual games, Nintendo Wii and iPhone have helped games reach even the most elusive audiences (like 70 year old grandparents). Disney just bought Playdom. How does the games industry change when everybody is a gamer?

When the industry's walls break down, then users can get their content on any platform. The game companies no longer have a lock on their users. They need to find the users and engage them where they can. They need to keep the user entertained on a variety of platforms. If the user is a *Halo* fan on the console, the publisher can hit that user with *Halo* content on the phone, the tablet computer, and other platforms. What matters is getting to the user with as many touch-points as possible. The one thing that doesn't change is that the content has to be outstanding.

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Speaking of massive distribution, Facebook virality made social games happen and created companies now sold for hundreds of millions of dollars. The rumors are that Google is building a social network with heavy games focus. Tim Chang, a notable VC investor in games business, says that content is king, but distribution is god. Where are the new gods emerging?

The early movers in the new digital game business were Facebook, Apple, and the massively multiplayer online game market (mainly through World of Warcraft). Now the other platforms are aiming to catch up. The open nature of Google's Android cell phone ecosystem is challenging the closed world of Apple's iPhone. The competitors to the iPad are coming out in droves. Other social networks are challenging Facebook. Zynga, Facebook's biggest game company, is diversifying into Japanese mobile social networks, Asian game markets such as Taiwan, and non-Facebook websites. And lots of free MMO games are challenging the subscription-based World of Warcraft. For every

The Trends Shaking Up the Games Industry

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Kinect for Xbox 360 lets players control games simply by moving around. ▼

The time has come for the console companies to step up. If they don't make a move soon, the smaller companies will disrupt their core businesses.

platform leader, a platform challenger will appear. The winner will be the platform that can reach the mass market, reduce friction for online purchases, and reach the users where they are.

In absolute revenue terms the games business is still ruled by the console games business. But even as console games have seen sales decrease for over a year, we've simultaneously seen the stunning rise of iPhone, Facebook, virtual goods-based monetization and huge mass audiences. How is the traditional console game industry adapting to the shifts in the landscape?

The console game industry has moved slowly because it has become addicted to profits. If you can sell a $60 game, why would you want to offer free-to-play games? That was why the traditional game industry has moved so slowly into mobile and social games. Their reluctance allowed Zynga to steal the market in Facebook games, growing to more than 240 million monthly active users and generating a valuation of five billion dollars (as measured by people who have sold their stock in the secondary market to other private investors). Now, Zynga is big enough to buy many traditional game console makers outright. That is changing the dynamics of the console makers. Electronic Arts reacted by paying as much as $400 million for Playfish, while Disney has swallowed Playdom for as much as $763 million. Activision Blizzard will likely have to move, though it still enjoys good profits by milking its various Blizzard franchises. Every other console game publisher has opened a digital online games business and is experimenting with social and mobile games. They each face the Innovator's Dilemma, as articulated by Clayton Christensen: They are making good money in their current business and don't want to undermine it by shifting into the smaller social and mobile game businesses. But if they don't make a move soon, the smaller companies will disrupt their core businesses.

The time has come for the console companies to step up. The free-to-play model is proven. It's a one billion dollar business that is growing fast, while the 20 billion dollar console business (in the U.S.) is starting to shrink. The console game companies have to get on the bandwagon or risk falling behind.

The coming launches of Microsoft's Kinect and Sony's Move are part of the console industry adaptation to the landscape changes. The current console generation will soon be five years old, and traditionally we would be looking at a launch of the next gen soon. If Kinect and Move extend the lifecycle of current console generation, when will we see a real next generation of consoles? What are your predictions on the technology and business changes those platforms will bring about?

Console makers optimize their launches so they can maximize their profits. In some ways, this makes the console launch cycles predictable. But as circumstances change, so does the length of the console cycle. A big factor in console introductions is whatever is happening with the platform owners. Right now, nobody has a motive to launch. That's because launches are costly and risky. It costs money to create a new box, and it risks alienating consumers who are enjoying their current systems.

In the old economics of the console, the game consoles launched every five years or so. In as much as Xbox 360 launched in 2005, Microsoft should have introduced a new machine in 2010. Instead it is introducing Kinect, which will give the Xbox 360 a longer life. Back in 2005, Microsoft was losing money on every console it sold, so it had the motivation to introduce a new one. This year, the console makers are, for the most part, making money, though they may lose money in any given slow quarter.

Meanwhile, Nintendo is starting to feel some pain, as Wii sales have fallen off. That may boost its inclination to launch a high-definition version of the Wii. However, Nintendo is introducing the 3DS handheld this year and that may help it prop up overall revenues and profits. Until its sales or profits have fallen for a year or more, Nintendo could simply keep milking what has been a record-setting console platform.

It's worth noting that the Wii is still priced at $199 and has only had one $50 price cut since its introduction in 2006. When demand falls for a console, the platform owner can give the console a mid-life boost by cutting $50 off the price. I have no inside information here, but it would make sense for Nintendo to cut the Wii's price to $149 in 2011 and try to hold out until 2012 before cutting the price to $99. Sony noted that more than half of the PlayStation 2s sold during the console's history were sold at $99 or less. The mass market loves $99 consoles, but it may be some time before we see them. In a recession environment, the strategy of lowering hardware prices will probably work better than introducing expensive new technology.

The $99 price also pretty much signals the last legs of a generation of consoles. That's when rumblings of new consoles emerge. By this rationale, we may not see new consoles until 2013. Meanwhile, Sony and Microsoft are introducing their new technologies this year and will presumably let Move and Kinect sell for a year before considering other actions. This year, both Sony and Microsoft are likely to sell more consoles than they ever have in any year during this generation. In other words, they haven't hit their peak. Only after they cross the peak and start seeing falling sales will they consider a new launch.

Both Sony and Microsoft have even less motivation than Nintendo to introduce new consoles, unless they dream up some outstanding new technology. The wild card remains social and mobile games. If those platforms start accelerating, they could hurt console sales. If there are more interesting platforms, gamers will spend their money on those platforms rather than on the aging consoles. Apple certainly forced Nintendo to launch the 3DS. If Apple and Facebook and others like them continue to steal gamers' attention, the console makers may have no choice but to react sooner with new console introductions.

We've talked about game trends in depth, so let's broaden the subject a little bit for the last topic. Game mechanics combined with social interactions create incredibly engaging experiences that can change your real life behavior. Foursquare started a mad rush to add badges to every app. Thought leaders like Jane McGonigal and Jesse Schnell are talking about the "game-ification" of all of our experiences from driving your car to saving the planet. Is there a role for traditional game companies to be played here? Will our brightest game designers move on to design games that aren't games?

That last question is intriguing. Console game companies are losing their best designers to social game companies, who in turn could lose their designers to the non-game companies that need to "game-ify" their content. We are a long way from that happening. But it's one of the logical outcomes if game-ification really works. I think that game-ification is going to be a big growth path for the industry as all industries learn the lessons of the game industry when it comes to capturing a user's attention.

The problem is that game-ification is only going to work in certain circumstances. It's not going to work all of the time. It's the same with games. A few games hold a user's attention. But many games bore us to death. We easily forget that games are not universally good. In fact, given the hit nature of the business, games are almost universally bad except for a very few good ones. When you take game mechanics and try to make them work in non-game applications, you are starting out with a big strike. The non-game applications are already boring. Now you're trying to enhance them, but they may still be boring after you're done game-ifying them. And if you game-ify them the wrong way, they may not be fun at all. Game-ification could be just as brutal in terms of the hits and the misses. I can't say that I've seen any game-ification hits yet.

But if we do get a hit, you can imagine that its impact could be big. The biggest of industries will try to game-ify. If it works, then the mass market customers of those industries will be embracing games in some way. That has to come back and help the game industry in some way in the long run. Perhaps the game publishers can open up game design services divisions that provide game-ification design services for others. ■

A few games hold a user's attention. But many games bore us to death. We easily forget that games are not universally good.

Fundamentals of Social Game Design

Part Two: Social Relevance

By David Rohrl

David Rohrl is a Creative Director at Playdom where he conceives and designs a variety of new games, helps to improve existing games, mentors junior design staff, and annoys producers. Rohrl has over 15 years of game development experience and previously occupied senior production and game design roles at Zynga, PopCap, EA/Pogo and The Learning Company. He has produced more than two-dozen published titles including casual and social favorites Word Whomp, Mobsters 2, *and* PathWords *—and has served as managing producer on a dozen more. A long time organizer of the annual Casual Games Summit, Rohrl chairs the IGDA Casual Games SIG and speaks regularly at major industry events. David can be reached at david.rohrl@casualconnect.org*

In the previous issue of *Casual Connect* (see Summer 2010 issue), I wrote about ways of shaping your game to reduce churn—particularly techniques that build a closer bond between your user and your game by requiring the user to come back to the game day after day.

In this installment, we'll look at one of the most interesting aspects of social game design: using social graph data to make your game feel socially relevant to players. After all, the really unique aspect of social games is that they are *social*—they have access to their players' social graph data and can use it in interesting ways to create games that are fundamentally *about* playing with friends. Surprisingly, some of the games that made the most interesting use of social graph data were among the very earliest games on Facebook. I'm not sure why this is—you would expect that as developers got more experienced at making Facebook games, their ability to use social data in really interesting ways would mature as well, but it just hasn't been the case. Of course, this might be because social-game-makers have been spending a lot of time and energy learning to make fun, solid single-player games and have focused less on making them social. Or maybe it's because these types of social game-play worked incredibly well with some older Facebook viral channels that no longer exist and developers haven't yet figured out how to make them as effective in the current viral channels.

The really unique aspect of social games is that they are social*—they have access to their players' social graph data and can use it in interesting ways to create games that are fundamentally* about *playing with friends.*

Creating Friendly Rivalry

One of social game players' most significant social emotions is a desire to be dominant and show off their prowess. This has been a fundamental part of the game maker's tool-kit since well before the creation of games on social networks. Ever since humans started competing, people have wanted to know who the best players are.

Of course, many social games let players see how they stack up against all the players in the world, just like the many non-social web games. This is particularly common in text RPG's like Playdom's *Sorority Life*. This mode of competition is particularly relevant to very hardcore players who are willing to spend large amounts of time and/or money to become elite players. But there is nothing about this type of feature that makes it unique to social games.

On the other hand, social game developers have created a new style of high score list that is much more relevant to casual players and is much more unique to social networks—the friend leader-board. It shows only the scores of the player's friends, not the scores of all players. Climbing this type of high score list may not give a player the same intense feelings of accomplishment that becoming the world's top player does, but it has two huge advantages over traditional leader-boards. First, instead of letting only one player in the world enjoy being in first place, it lets many players get excited about being tops in their own personal worlds. Second, a friend leader-board lets players feel a strong and personal emotion each time they pass one of their friends on the board. Playfish used a friend leader-board supported by highly polished victory animations when players passed their friends' scores and it turned their early social games like *Geo Challenge* into social gaming phenomena. Players' drive to gain bragging rights over their friends made these games hugely sticky, and friend leader-boards have since become nearly universal among social games.

Friends for Sale *requires you to buy and sell your friends to advance in the game.* ▲
Friends for Sale *allows you to give virtual gifts and make other social gestures to your purchased friends.* ►

Far left: PlayFish's leaderboard animations gave their early games a more social feel and made them stickier than competitive products. Left: Every player action in Parking Wars *involves a social interaction.*

Using Friends as Game Tokens

Serious Business' *Friends for Sale* was one of the monster hits of the early days of Facebook. The game was extremely simple. As the title would suggest, you could buy your Facebook friends (or at least representations of your friends) for in-game currency. Friends produced income for you as long as you owned them; the more expensive the friend, the more income he or she produced. Each time a person was purchased, the price would go up, giving a nice profit to the player he or she was "stolen" from and providing a cash bonus to the person being purchased.

This core game-play gave the game an amazingly social feel; every interaction in the game involved looking at the profile of a friend. The most basic activities in the game allowed the players to express a wide range of relationships and social emotions through the game, from flirting to a (fairly literal) "I own you" statement. The game's mechanics also encouraged you to think deeply about your friends' social status—each friend's popularity, activity (and attractiveness) was critical to your ability to sell them for a profit.

And the game's developers were smart enough to make sure they didn't just stop at the basic interactions. They used this brilliant core of social game-play to add a variety of powerfully expressive social features and killer virals.

Additional Social Features

Friends for Sale had three main additional social features beyond the basic friend marketplace: nicknames, gifting, and puppeting. Nicknames allowed you to set a tagline for any friends you owned. Gifting allowed you to spend game currency on virtual gifts for the friends you owned. Puppeting allowed you to pick two owned friends and a variety of verbs to create a viral suggesting that one friend had taken action on another (example: "Dave Rohrl shook hands with Jessica Tams"). Players used these features to express a variety of socially relevant feelings—everything from taunting to flirting to admiration. These features greatly enhanced players' enjoyment of a very simple game by allowing them to further express themselves.

Friends for Sale also featured some of the most intriguing virals in the business—especially in the era of the silent Facebook notification. Whenever you were purchased, you received a notification reporting who had purchased you and encouraging you to click into the game to see how much your friend thought you were worth. It was one of the best and most potent curiosity-based virals in the history of the platform.

Forcing Friend Interactions

Area/Code's *Parking Wars* was a highly unusual success story on Facebook. It was a game with virtually no virals, little or no ongoing development, virtually no marketing, and no attempt at a revenue stream. It was built by a small independent developer as an advergame for a large traditional media company, and neither company had meaningful experience on Facebook. Despite all of these handicaps, it showed steady, consistent growth for many months and was a huge early leader in player retention.

The core game was very simple. Each player had a street with five parking spots on it and two cars. (Players unlocked more cars as they leveled up.) Players could park their cars in empty parking spots on their friends' streets. Parking spaces could be legal for any car, legal for certain types of car, or off limits to all cars, and players could park their cars legally or illegally. Signs would also update randomly from time to time, so that cars could become legal or illegal while they sat. Cars would increase in value over time for the first 12 hours they were parked. The car owner could retrieve the car at any time and earn some cash. But if the car was parked illegally, the lot owner could also ticket it and steal the car's value from the car owner. Handing out tickets as a lot owner was fun and satisfying (as was silently slipping out of a space in a friend's lot before being ticketed), and players were able to add a personal message to the ticket message. (This may have been one of the inspirations for Facebook's current newsfeed dialog.)

A big part of the game's magic was that it managed to be heavily multiplayer even while being completely asynchronous (players did not need to be online at the same time in order to interact). The only ways to advance in the game were to park on your friends' streets and get them to park on yours. Surfing a friend's street to find a place to park got you to look at your friend's profile picture and muse briefly on the friend and your relationship. Ticketing your friend felt like a personal victory, and it was hugely tempting to tear off a juicy taunt in the ticket's comment field. And to be really dominant in the game, you had to think carefully about how your friends were playing the game and who was least likely to come around in time to ticket you.

Parting Thoughts

Although it seems like many early social games did a better job of creating highly socially relevant game-play than the games that came after them, I'm hopeful that the next generation of social games will combine the great single-player game-play that we're seeing on the platform today with some of the great social relevance we saw in the early days of social gaming. And in the next article we'll take a look at something that social games have gotten much, much better at over the last couple of years: allowing players to collaborate asynchronously. ■

Sorority Life's leaderboard shows all players, not just your friends.

Top 5 Legal Issues Around Social Games

A World After Facebook

Perhaps it goes without saying, but when dealing with legal matters, nothing goes without saying—so we'll say it: Even though this article may seem in many ways like legal advice, it isn't; it is intended merely to inform you about certain legal issues that may affect your business. As always, we encourage you to seek out your own legal counsel whenever trying to determine how the law applies to you.

—ed.

By Dr. Andreas Lober and Olivier Oosterbaan

Dr. Andreas Lober is a lawyer with the German firm Schulte Riesenkampff in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Andreas has worked in the gaming industry since 1991 and ran one of the first commercial online magazines for computer games in the 1990s. He studied in Germany and France and wrote his thesis about youth protection in computer games. Today, he and his team are advising public and private game companies in all legal matters with a sound business background. He is considered one of Germany's leading lawyers for computer games by the independent JUVE Handbook on Commercial Law Firms in Germany. Andreas can be reached at Andreas.Lober@schulte-lawyers.com.

Olivier Oosterbaan is a lawyer with the Dutch firm Create Law in Amsterdam. With Create Law, Olivier helps game companies large and small with IP and IT law advice, limiting risk and maximizing opportunities. Having studied and worked in the U.S., Paris, Brussels and the Netherlands, Olivier has a true understanding of international business and the international practice of law. When 12 years old, he had already pointed out differences and similarities between Activision's Atari 2600 titles and their clones. Olivier can be reached at olivier.oosterbaan@createlaw.nl.

1. Unfair Competition

The number one legal issue for social games at this moment is arguably that of unfair competition—the recent and ongoing high-profile multi-million dollar class-action law suit against Zynga, Offerpal, and other important players in the United States being a case in point. This class action is based on allegedly deceptive advertising in a number of social games. The lesson to be learned is that dubious advertisements within a game are dangerous not only for the advertiser, but also for the game in which they are directly or indirectly embedded, such as through ad servers or offer-based advertising.

Dubious advertisements in a game are dangerous not only for the advertiser, but also for the game in which they are embedded.

It goes without saying that the advertisements themselves must not be for illegal activities. In addition, in-game advertisements must not be false and must not be misleading. What's more, many jurisdictions have regulations dictating that ads targeted at children have to conform to an even higher standard. Similarly, there are new rules in Europe on unfair trade practices, and some national jurisdictions have additional and stricter rules. For example, in Germany, some state customer protection organizations try to enforce strict standards with regard to websites and games targeting children.

And last, but not least, sending unsolicited commercial messages –aka spam– is illegal in many jurisdictions. Even though social networks regulate themselves to limit the possibility for sending bulk messages (e-mail or DM), the game operator should look at its own legal obligations, including any additional regulation on tell-a-friend schemes.

2. Virtual Goods, Virtual Money, and EULAs

Virtual goods, their nature and their ownership, has to be one of the most enigmatic and often-discussed legal issues surrounding online games. Scholars and gamers alike argue whether the developer, the operator or the player is the "owner" of virtual goods. There is no clear-cut answer to this question, but there may not need to be one: The copyright in the created virtual good is owned by the creator of the work, which in most cases of goods in social games is the developer of the game. (The answer may be different for virtual worlds where users have more freedom in creating new and different objects.)

A more relevant question is what can the user do with the virtual goods? Is a user allowed to sell virtual goods for real money, even if a game's EULA prohibits this so-called "real money trade?" Today, there are a number of court decisions holding that such EULA clauses are enforceable, at least for free-to-play games that have (hard) virtual currencies. According to these cases, selling virtual money –which, in the end, is a type of virtual good– can be limited by the EULA. Of course, the more clear your EULA, the more likely you are to prevail should you have to litigate.

Another important issue for EULAs is that the operator of the game needs to be able to terminate the contract with a user. Most frequently, this is because of users not respecting the games' (advertised) rules. Similarly, an operator of a social game should make sure that the contract with a user can be terminated if the game is "pulled" from the social network, or if the operator decides to discontinue the operation of the game for any other reason.

3. Gambling

Offering gambling services without a government permit is illegal in most jurisdictions, and many countries refuse to accept permits from another country. While the rules vary from country to

country, gambling is usually defined as a game of chance in which you have to pay an entry fee in order to get the chance to win something of some value. Some jurisdictions are more strict, stating that your game falls under gambling laws even if the game merely contains "an element of luck," while others are more liberal and state that you do not fall under gambling laws if the element of skill is more important than the element of luck. (It's a sliding scale.) But which jurisdiction should a game operator adhere to, the more strict one or the more lenient one? In any event, you would be ill advised to violate the gambling laws of the country of establishment. But, in theory, the laws of all countries in which the game can be played have to be respected, even though there may be practical limitations to making sure you comply with the law in each country where you operate. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to carefully check the legal situation in cases where prizes of some value are involved in a game of chance. And this is not limited to cash prizes since virtual goods and virtual money can be considered as something of "some value." For this reason, social games that are monetized through the sale of virtual goods/virtual currency and that rely heavily on luck should be carefully implemented.

4. Trademarks

The names of social games can be protected under trademark law and trademarks in games are increasingly a contentious issue with some of the bigger gaming companies (including Zynga) starting to actively enforce their trademarks. In general, it is a good idea to register a game name as a trademark if it qualifies for trademark protection. (Keep in mind that purely descriptive names generally do not qualify for trademark protection.)

It's also a good idea to search for similar names of other games or other similar products before launching (or even putting into development) a game. Keep in mind though that even if a particular name is not registered, you may be barred from using it, especially if the game is well known.

Likewise, if there are registered trademarks for a series of games with a common element (FarmVille, FrontierVille, Lunar Ville…you get the idea) you may be barred from making a game that includes that common element (in this case "Ville"). (And to avoid any misunderstanding: in case you launched your game or registered its trademark earlier, there is no need to worry.)

5. Privacy Laws

Privacy protection should definitely rank in the top 5 legal issues, both on the basis of any policies imposed by the platform owner, and by regulation. Keep in mind that the United States and the EU know different regimes, that even within the EU there are differences, and that these rules (and the interpretation of them) can and do change. For more on privacy, see our article in the Casual Connect Summer 2010 issue. ■

(NOTE: The information in this article is of a general informational nature: it does not constitute advice or create a lawyer-client relationship.)

*If there are registered trademarks for a series of games with a common element (*FarmVille, FrontierVille, Lunar Ville…*) you may be barred from making a game that includes that common element (in this case "Ville").*

The Top 5 Mistakes You Should Avoid in Social Game Development

by Sana Choudary, SomaTone Interactive

Mistake 1: Focusing on higher production quality rather than on social game-play patterns

While the production quality of social games has steadily risen over the last few years, most are still not as high quality as casual gam es. Many assume that higher production value games will help them compete with existing social games. Often, this means higher focus on art and sound at the cost of creating a game that utilizes players' motivation to connect with their friends.

Mistake 2: Overreliance on cross promotion as the main game distribution mechanism

Although the revenue and exposure from cross promotion partnerships are important, they do not replace the need for traditional distribution mechanisms: 1) ad buys on Facebook and Facebook application ad networks and 2) viral mechanics within the game. In doing so, developers inadvertently reduce the pool size of initial users that can spread their game, as well as fail to assess if a customer profile different from that available from their cross-promotion partners has better-monetizing users. Additionally, in some cases such actions lead to drastically higher per-user customer acquisition costs than necessary.

Mistake 3: Overreliance on viral measures

Another common mistake, particularly among smaller developers, is the reliance on viral mechanics exclusively in the absence of ad buys, cross promotion or other forms of marketing such as social media. Like overreliance on cross promotion, sole reliance on viral methods reduces the pool of users that can spread the game virally and increases the time needed for the game to grow to a size needed to allow substantial monetization.

Mistake 4: Indiscriminate addition of virtual items

Many assume the best way to implement virtual items is to add lots of opportunities for the user to spend on virtual items, yet this can lead to game balance and retention problems. For example, if the user hits their

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Social Game Marketing 2.0

5 Questions to Ask as You Grow Your Game on Facebook

by Jussi Laakkonen

Jussi Laakkonen founded Applifier to find more players for his own company's social games, and discovered that cross-promotion works so well that that over 100 applications reaching over 50 million monthly active users joined in just four months. He made the tough choice to leave game development behind to focus on helping others succeed in the social games market.

Jussi blogs infrequently at http://jussilaakkonen.wordpress.com and tries to remember to tweet more often at @jussil.

For game developers, the promised land of unlimited viral growth on Facebook is no more. The "apocalypse" came in March 2010, when Facebook turned off notifications that had been a popular way to re-engage users through (often quite spammy) free messaging. Together with throttling of other viral channels like the stream, the social games user base as a whole decreased significantly during Q2/2010.

Games can no longer grow solely through virality. This, in turn, means more money flowing into Facebook ads and third party ad networks, with the expected result: rising ad prices. Several third party ad networks now quote list prices of over $0.50 per installed US user; highly specific demographic targeting can raise this close to $1 per install.

Ad pricing is generally a good indicator of how much games are earning on Facebook. The market could not sustain those ad prices unless games were earning a positive return even with high ad prices. So, overall, the market appears healthy. Many companies are generating respectable revenue and profit on Facebook.

Mastering user acquisition must be a priority if you plan to succeed in growing your game on Facebook. Here are five questions to ask yourself when you look to grow your game on Facebook. The answers might form the basis of your own cost effective strategy for driving more traffic to your game.

Mastering user acquisition must be a priority if you plan to succeed in growing your game on Facebook.

1. Are you optimizing what virality you have left?

There is still plenty of virality left on Facebook. Find ways of engaging new players and you can still grow extremely fast. Social game developers are focusing more on making virality an inherent part of the game beyond the "Rescue a lonely cow" or "I need five friends more to build a shed". Although these tactics still work to an extent, everyone's already doing them.

As an example let's take *Lucky Train*, where you load up a train and send it on its way through your personal network. Your social graph becomes a railroad network and friends can add intermediate destinations and help the train to get its final destination. *Lucky Train* grew in August by nearly 10x to reach one million monthly active users.

Virality can't simply be added on after the game is done. How are you designing virality in and optimizing it?

▲ **Lucky Train** *turns your social graph into a fantasy railroad network and uses it to grow virally.*

2. Can you get brands to work with you?

Social games used to be immune to licenses and brands. From *Pet Society* to *FarmVille*, the market seemed capable of creating new brands players fell in love with.

The current industry zeitgeist is that brands are the new black. Leading this resurgence is *Family Feud*, from iWin and Backstage Technologies, that succeeded through inherently viral gameplay (thanks to being a co-operative trivia game) and leveraging a well-known brand. *Family Feud* has nearly 7 million monthly active users. *Price is Right* is following in its footsteps.

Playfish, now part of Electronic Arts, has brought two major licensed properties to Facebook: *FIFA Superstars* and *Madden NFL Superstars.*

Family Feud *has won big by having a combination of co-operative trivia and recognizable brand.* ►

◀ Icy Tower *leveraged Facebook fans and players to kick start its growth.*

Kingdoms of Camelot *offers a deep gameplay experience: a game for gamers.* ▼

Many big brands are eager to try out new ways to use social media marketing. In July, Playdom announced its cooperation with a large US based casino, Harrah's, to launch a World Series of Poker game on Facebook.

Can you get brands to work with you? How about selling brand placement in your game, trying to secure a brand license for free or even asking for a marketing budget to get more users to engage with their brand in your game?

3. How can you attract existing fans?

Everybody's on Facebook, including those who play your games on other platforms and those who engage with any brand you are associated with. How can you get them to play your social game?

Muskedunder Interactive, the creator of the *Icy Tower* casual game that has over 20 million downloads, benefited hugely from having a popular Facebook fan page with over 300,000 fans before launching their social game. That fan base kick-started the game's growth. Promotions, in-game advertising and incentives can be used to drive traffic from your other properties either to a fan page or straight to your game. You could go even further and integrate a social game property's management style gameplay (e.g. train a pit crew in a driving game) into a mobile version for action oriented gameplay (e.g. drive the car in races).

If you are making a sport game, can you reach fans of related sports or supporters of a sports federation or club? If you are licensing a brand as suggested above, what co-marketing efforts can you secure from the license holder?

4. What's your angle?

The social games market is full of clones just like the iPhone or the downloadable casual games markets. Although copying is the sincerest form of flattery, you need to go beyond just copying if you want to stand out and be "shareable".

The more users engage with your stream story, the more prominently Facebook will display the stream story.

If you want to be truly viral, your players and their friends must be interested in commenting, liking and sharing your stream stories, as the stream is by far the most important remaining viral channel. The more users engage with your stream story, the more prominently Facebook will display the stream story. Stream optimization is the new search engine optimization.

There were no popular city-building games before January 2010, although the genre lends

(continued on pg. 40)

Top-5 mistakes (continued)

max pay limit before they have developed a strong investment in the game. If there is no choice to proceed in ways not involving paying, the user may exit rather than pay to continue playing.

Indiscriminate addition of virtual items also leads to lost monetization opportunities due to the production scheduling. Not all virtual items are created equal. Some monetize better than others due to user appeal and the point in game flow at which they enter. By using constrained developer resources to create and launch virtual items indiscriminately instead of basing decisions on virtual items testing, developers lose the opportunity to maximize monetization.

Mistake 5: Failing to model and tweak user in-flow and spending

Social games rely on repeat direct revenue from a customer for the same game, so it is vital to base game updates on actual real-time user growth and spending instead of big picture assumptions. This mistake prevents developers from taking part in a critical organization of areas of focus and priority needed at different points in the lifecycle of a game. In addition, some developers do not tweak the growth and spending flows based on real information of how their games are acting. They, therefore, are unable to organize user reactions in a way that allows decision making on the real-time data. Lack of focus on real-time data is often the reason why developers with large bases of users are unable to monetize effectively. ■

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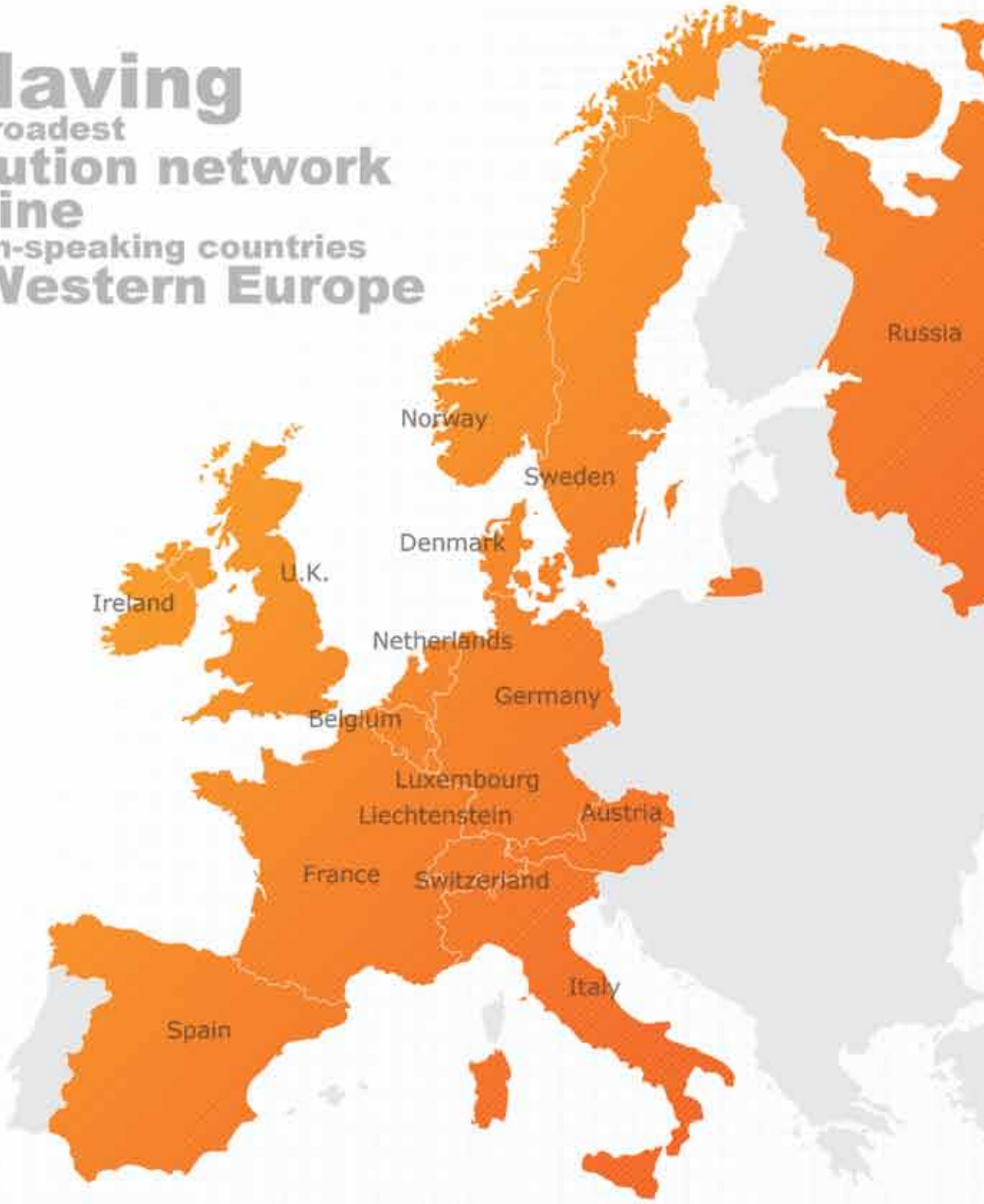

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Social Game Marketing 2.0

5 Questions to Ask as You Grow Your Game on Facebook

▲ *Applifier cross-promotion bar shown next to* **Nightclub City**, *that reaches 8 million monthly active users on Facebook.*

itself well to the management-heavy gameplay typical for social games. Are there openings like that left?

Facebook attracts an international audience—can you localize or even create a game for a specific country? Are there under-served market niches like 20-year old males yearning for higher adrenaline gameplay?

How about parody (just try *FarmVillain*)? A real game for gamers (see *Kingdoms of Camelot*)? Why will people want to identify with your game and share it with their friends?

5. How can I get a portfolio effect for my games?

Cross-promotion has been an incredibly powerful strategy employed by big publishers to drive Facebook users to their new games. Zynga grows their games in the first weeks of launch by several million monthly active users—in large part thanks to cross-promotion.

If you publish multiple games, you should be cross-promoting them and creating deep incentives for players to engage with your other games, such as "reach level 5 on our farm game to receive five free diamonds!".

According to Facebook (F8 conference 2010) an average player on Facebook plays four games. Only the largest publishers like Zynga, Playfish and Playdom can create large, varied portfolios to keep the player happily playing only their games. For everybody else, the reality is that their players are playing other publishers' games.

Applifier, a new network that lets independent social game developers and publishers cross-promote their games for free, is a way to benefit from this user behavior. Your users find great games to use alongside yours. In turn, your game gets new, viral users without spending any money.

Are you getting a portfolio effect for your games? How are you leveraging your existing traffic?

What are your answers?

Applifier came about because we needed to find a new way to grow our own social game. Applifier grew explosively to reach 50+ million users. For us the answer was actually stepping away from game development to help others succeed.

What about you? The virality, brand relationship, user management, game theme, and cross-promotion tactics shared here can be the cornerstone of your own original strategy.

Even in this challenging post-viral promotional environment, you can find affordable and efficient ways to promote your game so that more of the 500 million Facebook users start playing your games. ■

What about you? The virality, brand relationship, user management, game theme, and cross-promotion tactics shared here can be the cornerstone of your own original strategy.

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How To Boost Your Games' Potential

5 Unexpected Solutions

by Rob Carroll

Rob Carroll is the Social Game Advisor for Tapjoy. In his role with Tapjoy he works with game developers to help improve their on-line games through better monetization, viral messaging and game play. Rob is a veteran of the social games space having worked on over 12 titles in his days as a producer with Zynga and Hive7. Rob can be reached at rob.carroll@tapjoy.com.

In just the past two years the social gaming space has evolved from a "wild west" free-for-all where internet millionaires could pop up overnight, to a legitimate category of games and an important new business model for all the top studios. It's hard to argue against the importance of having a presence on a platform with over 1/2 a billion players one click away from your game.

As the space has grown and the reach of social games has become apparent to everyone, the landscape has become crowded with thousands of titles, some great, some not so great, all clamoring for visibility. Without question, the space has changed for the worse over the past few months, with the loss of viral communication channels and ever-increasing costs. Despite these new challenges, developers aren't being scared away, but the importance of fine tuning your game to take advantage of every opportunity you can has become increasingly apparent.

With that in mind, I've compiled a list of optimizations developers can make to their social games, in design, viral communication and monetization. Each of these systems is critically important for developers to make their games successful.

#5: Endless Floods of Money

For most games that fall into the RPG or resource management categories, maintaining a strong player economy is an enormous challenge. Most of the games in these categories use a dual currency system as the backend of their economies. These dual currencies consist of an in-game currency that scales to accommodate a wide range of user levels, allowing non-monetizing users to fully participate in the game and a real money currency that is far more fixed and caters to users paying for the game.

Once the player reaches a point where their money has no value for them, the motivation for acquiring in-game currency and thus, game play, is lost

The real money currency is much easier to balance in this system. Designers can directly balance the amount of money they expect a user to spend in the game, creating packages and incentives to get users to break out the credit card. With the in-game currency, achieving this balance is much more challenging. Designers need to give players enough money to keep playing the game while not flooding the system with so much currency that it becomes valueless.

One problem that I've seen frequently is that designers will give the player a recurring revenue source that is constantly giving them in-game currency, whether they are online or not. This can give users huge stockpiles of money while not actually rewarding them for actively playing the game. A good fix for this problem is to tie the rewarding of in-game currency to specific actions the player performs in the game, such as activating a building, visiting a friend or spinning a slot. Developers can also give rewards simply for the normal game play users participate in. *Battle Punks* from Gravity Bear has implemented this tactic particularly well. In this game, users are only given money when they perform the primary action in the game, fighting other players. As a result, the value of in-game currency remains high while rewarding the active players in the game.

▲ Battle Punks *by Gravity Bear. http://apps.facebook.com/battlepunks.*

#4: Good Currency Sinks

Once you have refined the methodology of distributing in-game currency to your players, the next challenge is figuring out how to take that money back from them. Developing "currency sinks," or a compelling method to make your users spend money is a critically important factor in keeping the game play interesting for the player because once the player reaches a point where their money has no value for them, the motivation for acquiring in-game currency and thus, game play is lost.

The challenge for the developer is to find ways to make players spend money without stopping their game play when the money runs out. A great example of this mechanic in action is in *NanoStar Siege*

◄ NanoStar Siege *by Digital Chocolate. http://apps.facebook.com/nanostarsiege/*

▼ City of Wonder *by Playdom. http://apps.facebook.com/cityofwonder*

by Digital Chocolate. The primary goal in this game is to launch attacks against other players' bases, an action which requires troops. However, the more troops players add to a battle, the more gold they need to spend on that fight. Players will often spend more gold than they will win in order to secure a victory and gain experience. The result of this mechanic is that gamers are constantly trying to accumulate enough gold for their next attack and currency flows out of the economy with these battles.

#3: New Content

As the top social game developers quickly learned, the games in this space are much more of a service than a product. Once a console game is shipped, the bulk of the work is done and the team can move on to other projects. With social games, once the game is launched the real work has just begun. If your game is going to have virtual goods in it, there must be a steady stream of new and compelling items for your users to want to buy. Otherwise the content gets stale and your users will lose interest and leave.

One of the better ways to keep up with the need for fresh content in your game is to hold back some of the content you've created when the game is launched. Don't stuff every item you developed in the game inventory at launch. During the concept, creation and development of a new game there are tons of ideas thrown around for what would be cool to have, what sells best and what is needed for the storyline. Odds are that with all of these items the development team thinks of, only half would be needed for a strong launch. Take some of the items you plan to use for launch, put them aside and use them as the "new" content for the first few weeks of the game. Slowly releasing pre-developed content will not only drive game play and keep things fresh for players, but will provide you with breathing room for your designers to analyze live metrics from the game and continue creating new content based on user feedback.

#2: Social Pressure

Most developers have struggled to adapt to the changes in the Facebook viral landscape. These changes have made one simple fact clear: social games need to be social. When these titles were just starting out it didn't matter too much what messaging you gave to your users, it was all new and users would send most any message their friends. Today, fatigue is setting in on users and they are much less willing to spam their social graph with posts about cows, armies, and such.

What is proving to be a more successful viral channel for developers is to require users to call on friends to help them progress in the game. A great example of this is in Playdom's *City of Wonder*. It has the standard viral communication options; bragging, gifting and inviting. But it also uses a good mechanic wherein players can get "wonders of the world" for free by recruiting their friends to help them via posts to the stream feed. Playdom is clearly doing something right as they saw around 3 million new installs in a week, while the other top games were lucky to have a quarter of that.

#1: New User Tutorial

Now we reach what I see as the #1 tactic developers can use to help make their games more successful. While there are a number of features you can adjust and test to help increase your numbers, few of them can have as dramatic an effect as a good new user experience. While some

Fatigue is setting in on users, and they are much less willing to spam their social graph with posts about cows

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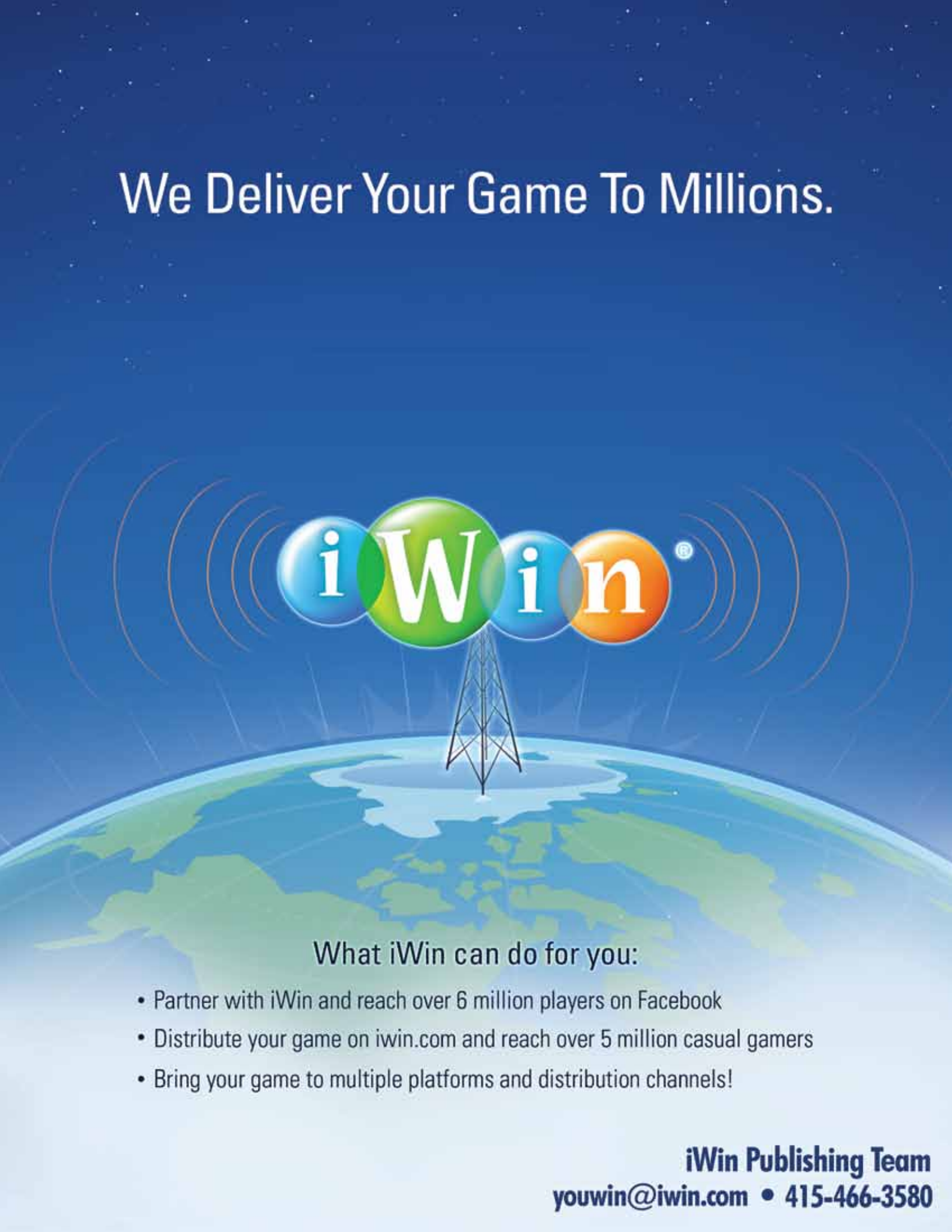

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games may share similar game mechanics, a good user tutorial can make a huge difference in which players stay in the game or leave out of frustration. Many games see as few as 30 percent of their new users reaching the end of the tutorial and actually playing the game. If there was a feature that was causing you to lose 70 percent of your users, you would likely kill that feature immediately and yet many developers never put the effort into teaching their users how to play the game.

While it's hard to give a blanket description on what developers should do for their tutorial, there are a few key elements that make for a good experience: Big arrows or highlights showing the user what and where they should be clicking, simple instructions for what is needed to play the game, and information for the user on what the "cool" parts of the game are. If you take the user through these points and they still drop out, then the game might not be for them, not everyone is going to like your game, but hit the key areas in a clear and concise way and give your game its chance to shine.

A great example of a new user tutorial is 5th Planet Games' *Dawn of the Dragons*. They take the user through the important areas of the game while graying out the parts that are not relevant at the time and highlighting the areas where the player needs to be clicking. It's a bit long but they roll a good amount of story in to keep the user interested and build engagement.

While these suggestions are not a guarantee for success, they are time tested and will help improve your numbers. Whether your game revolves around farming, role playing, or fighting, the most important way you can help make your game successful is to make the best game you can and hope your players love it as much as you. ■

▲ Dawn of the Dragons *by 5th Planet Games. http://apps.facebook.com/dawnofthedragons*

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Postmortem: *Flower Garden* for iPhone

Confessions Of An Independent iPhone Developer

by Noel Llopis

Noel is following his lifelong dream of being an indie developer. He founded Snappy Touch to focus exclusively on iPhone development, and released Flower Garden *and* Lorax Garden. *He writes about game development regularly, from a monthly column in* Game Developer Magazine, *to the* Game Programming Gems *series, or his book* C++ for Game Programmers. *Some of his past games include* The Bourne Conspiracy, DardwatchH, *and the* Mechassault *series. He earned an M.S. in Computer Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a B.S. in Computer Systems Engineering from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Noel can be reached at noel.llopis@casualconnect.org*

I started developing *Flower Garden* in the Fall of 2008, and it was released on the App Store in April 2009 as the first game from Snappy Touch (my indie one-man company). I've been working on *Flower Garden* on and off since then, and perhaps because of that, I've never taken the time to write a postmortem before. *Flower Garden* isn't a completed project that I can put in a box and call it done; it's a living project, with constant new features and content, and, most importantly, a steady stream of new users. So even though I have blogged extensively about some of the lessons I've learned with *Flower Garden*, this will be the first time I've approached it as a formal postmortem, bringing together all the experiences from launch and the following year and a half on the App Store.

What Went Right

1. *Remaining true to the original vision*

Flower Garden didn't begin its life as a design document. Not even as a list of features, or as a "game X meets game Y" description that so many publishers seem to love. Instead, it started out as a description of feelings I wanted players to experience. That original description was "A soothing, nurturing, creative experience that can be shared with loved ones". Not a word in there about flowers, or growing, or watering. I'm sure that's partly the reason *Flower Garden* ended up being a strange hybrid that many people are even hesitant to call a game.

> Flower Garden *isn't a completed project that I can put in a box and call it done; it's a living project, with constant new features and content.*

Once that description was in place, the rest was almost mechanical. If something didn't completely meet that description, I mercilessly cut it off. The part about being soothing, combined with target platforms of the iPhone and iPod Touch, meant that simplicity was extremely important as well. It was easy to envision all sorts of features and options. The hard part was to distill them into something simple and as transparent to the user as possible.

For example, early on, I had to decide what to do when plants were neglected and dried out. The usual consequence in pet-style games is that plants that go without watering for an extended period of time should die. It becomes immediately obvious that plants dying because you didn't get to your phone in time is not very soothing or nurturing; quite the opposite! So right away I decided that plants would dry out and look wilted, but would recover completely after the first full watering (the only penalty was that the watering wouldn't make them grow that time, just recover them to health). Many players have noticed and commented how much they appreciate that fact.

2. *Updates with a goal*

I knew from the start that *Flower Garden* wasn't going to be something that every iPhone user had to have, but I was counting on it having relatively broad appeal among iPhone users (yes, both men and women) interested at some level in flowers and gardening. However, a few weeks after launch, it was clear that sales were dropping to a very low level (see "What Went Wrong"), and it was going to be far below the worst-case scenario I had envisioned. (Section A in Figure 1.)

Common wisdom at the time was that iPhone apps are kept alive through updates, and sometimes that would even rekindle the flame of sales. So I released two updates with the most-frequently requested features from *Flower Garden* users, but it made very little difference.

At that point I had to take a very hard look at the project and decide if it was worth spending any more time and effort on. I was ready to give up; but, every time I showed the app to someone, they universally loved the game. The problem, I determined, was that people either didn't know *Flower Garden* existed or they didn't have an understanding of the "feel" of the game just by reading a description and seeing some screenshots.

At this point I had a small, but loyal fan base. It would have been very easy to go along making updates based on what they wanted, but all that would have done is make the people who had

already paid for the game happier. That's not a bad thing, but how was it going to increase sales? I decided to put that aside and concentrate on a very specific goal: To increase the number of people who were aware of and played *Flower Garden*. I believed the game was good, so if I achieved that goal, sales would follow.

So over the Summer and Fall of 2009, I released several updates aimed to achieve that goal: Sending bouquets through Facebook, having a free version with limited functionality, and cross-promoting with other indie iPhone games. Each of those updates resulted in a minor increase in sales, but no where near my goal. *Flower Garden* was turning out to be a commercial flop (Section B in Figure 1.)

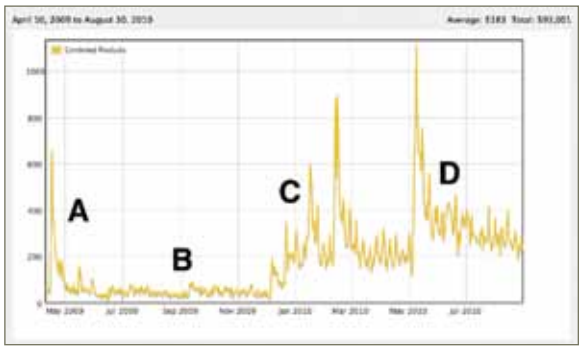


Figure 1.* Flower Garden *revenue since launch

Finally, in December 2009, as soon as Apple allowed free applications to have microtransactions (or in-app purchases), I decided to give it one last go. I would add a flower shop to the game and let people purchase more seeds and more garden space, which was something they had been requesting for months. This feature wouldn't reach more people, but it would let all the users who had previously bought it (or tried it for free) spend a bit of money to get some extra features. It was worth a try.

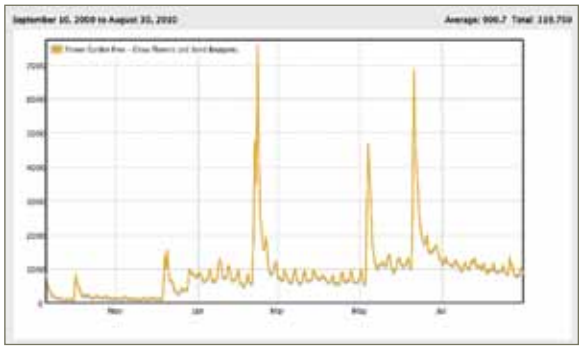


Figure 2. Downloads of* Flower Garden *Free Trial

3. Finding the right business model

It turns out in-app purchases was what *Flower Garden* needed. I reached out to all previous users and announced the new Flower Shop. Revenue started increasing right away; interestingly, not just from purchases in the Flower Shop, but also from extra purchases of the game itself. (Section C in Figure 1) The number of downloads of the free version also increased by a factor of 10 (see Figure 2). Clearly, that success was due to a combination of word of mouth and the viral effect of sending bouquets to other people. It brought a lot of past users back into the game, which in turn prompted more new users to try it for the first time. This, in combination with the holiday season, resulted in even higher sales than the initial release spike.

Purchased seeds and garden space were only half of the picture. The best selling item in the Flower Shop was fertilizer: A bottle of fertilizer has 20 doses, and applying a dose of fertilizer to a potted plant allows it to fully grow in a day (most plants take a couple of days to grow, and some of them can take as long as a week). In a way, it lets users trade a few cents for time. Unlike seed packets and garden space, fertilizer is a consumable product, so once it is used up, you need to buy it again if you want to continue using it. Because of that, sales of fertilizer accounted for over half of all the in-app purchase revenue (see Figure 3).

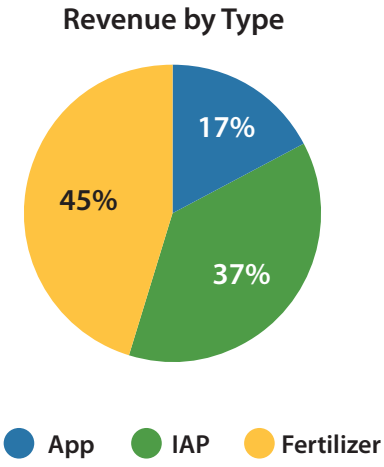


Figure 3. Total revenue by type of sale

4. Connecting with the users

Stumbling into the right business model was half of the success equation for *Flower Garden*. The other half was connecting with the users. On the App Store, your users are not your customers, they're Apple's. It might seem like a question of semantics, calling them users vs. customers, but it's not. Users use your game. Customers purchase it. It turns out all the purchasing happens through iTunes, so you have no data about your users: no email addresses, no phone numbers, no demographics. This puts you at a significant disadvantage. If you want to leverage your user base and communicate with them directly, you need to be proactive and turn Apple's customers into your own customers.

Originally, there wasn't anything in *Flower Garden* that allowed me to connect with the users. There was a prominent feedback button which let people send me feedback, comments, and bug reports, but there wasn't much beyond that. It turns out that, by the nature of the app, whenever people sent a bouquet through email they had to provide their email address. It wasn't until December that I decided to use this resource and create a mailing list to announce new updates and releases.

At the same time, I created a Facebook page for *Flower Garden* and promoted it from within the game. The reach wasn't as great as through the mailing list, but it was another way to reach a few thousand people that I otherwise could not. And because of the way Facebook is structured, people might discover *Flower Garden* if their friends participate in the discussions on the page.

Finally, I added an in-game news system. At any point, I could notify all the active users of *Flower Garden* of any news, promotions or new features just by updating a web page. Additionally, this connection with the users will allow for effective communication of new game launches in the future.

Postmortem: *Flower Garden* for iPhone

Confessions Of An Independent iPhone Developer

The combination of all three communication approaches proved very effective. In 2010, I released updates targeting special dates like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. In each case, I contacted the users to let them know about the new features, and it resulted in immediate revenue spikes. (See section D in Figure 1.)

5. Keeping up with Apple's innovations

Being a company of one means I often don't have enough manpower to compete with the big companies, but I do have one advantage: Agility. Whenever Apple announced a new advance that could significantly benefit *Flower Garden*, I implemented it as quickly as possible. That's how *Flower Garden* became one of the first free apps to have in-app purchases, and how it managed to climb up the iPad charts when I released a universal iPhone-iPad version shortly after the iPad release.

Keeping up with Apple's latest innovations not only gave *Flower Garden* something different and kept the users happy (especially those early adopters who can be very vocal about their preferences), but it also made the game stand out in Apple's eyes. *Flower Garden* was lucky enough to be selected as a Staff Favorite on the App Store twice, but that was almost a year after it was originally released. I attribute that to being an app that showcased the use of some new iOS features.

What Went Wrong

1. Taking too long to ship

I come from a game development background of AAA console titles with multiple hundreds of people on a team and project lengths of several years. I switched to iPhone development, in part, because I was attracted to the shorter development cycles; however, fully committing to this method of development proved to be a challenge.

The development of *Flower Garden* began in October of 2008, and it appeared on the App Store in early April of 2009. That's slightly over six months of development. It's not much in comparison to a five-year development cycle for a console title, but six months is an eternity in iPhone time, especially if you consider that the App Store had only been live since July 2008.

Whenever Apple announced a new advance that could significantly benefit Flower Garden, *I implemented it as quickly as possible*

The fact that *Flower Garden* actually shipped in six months is due to friends and colleagues who urged me to ship as soon as possible. Left to my own devices, it might have taken another month or two. To avoid compromising quality, extra features that I had planned to incorporate in the original release ended up being cut in order to get the game shipped.

Even so, six months was a long time. Part of it was due to learning a new platform and a new development environment. ObjectiveC is a breeze to learn for any competent C++ programmer, but the Apple API for UI and interfacing with the iPhone has a steeper learning curve.

An even steeper learning curve is knowing how to design a natural UI for a touch platform. I was a month into development before I finally bought an iPod Touch, and only then did I really begin learning how to design an effective touch interface. Things that come naturally now, required some rework and consequent waste of time then.

Taking that long to develop, especially with a very experimental product, was very risky. It would have been very possible to never recoupe the time and money invested. Also, the iPhone market changes so rapidly that what looked like a slam dunk six months ago, might feel dated and end up as a commercial flop today. Waiting any longer than absolutely necessary to release puts a project at risk and makes it more likely to fail financially.

2. Not having adequate server infrastructure at launch

This is probably an issue that every game with a significant server component faces at launch. Initially, the only possible way to send bouquets through email was by sending the information to my server and creating and sending the email from there. Bandwidth wasn't as much of a problem as was the number of emails the server was suddenly generating and subsequently convincing the rest of the Internet that those emails were not spam.

In a way, I'm lucky that *Flower Garden* didn't have a stronger initial week or wasn't featured by Apple right from the beginning. I would have blown all email limits. I even scrambled to implement a queing system in the week after release so bouquets wouldn't get lost and would get delivered later instead.

Eventually, Apple added functionality to the iPhone SDK to allow apps to send mail directly from the iPhone, using the user's mail account. As soon as that was available, I switched *Flower Garden* to send bouquets that way, and most of the server stress went away.

When I added in-app purchases, I had to add a fair amount of server functionality to verify receipts and deliver the content, so server reliability became an issue. Especially because money was involved, and there's nothing that makes users feel cheated more than spending money on an in-game item and not receiving it.

Eventually, I switched all server functionality tothe Google App Engine with great results. Up time is virtually 100 percent, and it scales without a problem, all for a very reasonable cost. I should have done that from the beginning.

3. Weak and unfocused initial PR effort

From my years of experience developing games, I was fully aware that PR and marketing were going to require significant effort in order to create a successful product. Although I managed to do a reasonable job by myself, I underestimated the effort required and missed an opportunity for a much stronger launch.

As soon as I submitted *Flower Garden* for review to Apple, I started on the PR campaign. I put together a video of the game, contacted every major iPhone review site with a description of the game and promotional materials, and reached out to other general media sites that could be interested in covering *Flower Garden*.

The lack of a hard release date was one of the major problems with this PR campaign. It's impossible to predict how long Apple will take to approve an app, and I didn't know it was possible to delay the release to a future date after approval (I was too nervous and eager to have done that anyway). That made it harder for review sites to commit to review around a particular date, and as a result, reviews trickled in for two weeks after launch.

I was successful at getting all the major iPhone web sites and press to cover *Flower Garden*. I had established personal relationships with most of them ahead of time, so when I approached them with my game, they were much more receptive. At the last minute, I decided to extend the offer to create custom bonus flowers modeled and branded after each web site (with their colors, shapes, and their logo on the seed packet). I made sure they knew I wasn't asking for a favorable review in exchange, but it did catch their attention and they were more likely to review the game.

On the other hand, I had little success getting media outside the iPhone world to cover *Flower Garden*. I didn't have a personal relationship with people on those sites and magazines, and my cold submission of materials and even the offer to create custom flowers went unanswered. Perhaps going with a professional PR company would have helped getting noticed.

One thing I would do differently is to start building buzz around the game a bit earlier. I only announced *Flower Garden* a few weeks before launch, and I think it would have benefitted from being announced earlier, getting some press coverage, and getting players and reviews excited in anticipation.

4. *No future-proof art assets*

This one was completely my oversight. The simplicity of the iPhone platform was such a breath of fresh air that I failed to think ahead about how it could change in the future. As a result, most of the art assets were authored specifically for the iPhone resolution. When it came time to create an iPad version or supporting iPhone 4 resolution I was left with rasterized art at a low resolution and no easy way to provide high-definition assets. As a result, I had to re-work some assets or provide scaled-up versions.

Fortunately, a lot of the content in *Flower Garden* is 3D, so the biggest improvement was simply changing the resolution of the 3D viewport.

All the flower geometry is procedurally generated at runtime, so that was also easy to adapt to different variations of the iPhone platform.

The iOS platforms already have three different resolutions, and I'm sure more are on the way. I'm making sure that all the assets for future projects either use vector graphics, or are authored at high resolutions. That will also make porting them to different platforms much easier.

5. *Apple lock-in*

From the very beginning, I made the decision to develop *Flower Garden* for the iPhone platform without any compromises. I wanted it to feel totally at home on an iPhone, and as much as possible as an app made by Apple. If you're familiar with Apple, you know that's a pretty tall order. Every pixel and every interaction counts and should be considered carefully.

To accomplish this and to develop it as quickly as possible, I made full use of every native library Apple provided: From UI widgets and standard components to networking libraries and storage solutions. In the end, *Flower Garden* felt very much like an iPhone app. Maybe not quite like an app created by Apple (it was my first large iPhone project after all), but it came reasonably close and I'm happy with the result.

The flip side, however, is that *Flower Garden* is inexorably tied to Apple. It wasn't a big deal at first, but the ever-growing mobile market leaves me wishing I could port it to other platforms like Android, Windows Phone 7, or maybe even Facebook. Right now, the porting effort required would probably eat up any profits from that platform, so I'm waiting until there is a viable option that would make porting a clear decision.

I definitely want to keep multiple platforms in mind in the future. My future projects will continue to use Apple libraries where it makes most sense, especially in those UI areas that give users a familiar feel, but I will try to minimize how spread they are in the code. As long as it has no impact on the user experience, I'll use more portable solutions for areas of the code where that is an option.

Conclusions

Flower Garden was an incredible ride for a first-time project on the iPhone (and my first released indie project). It was full of highs and lows and it was, without a doubt, a great learning experience. Even though it never became a top seller, I feel very fortunate to have found the right business model for it and that it's consistently selling well enough to finance my future projects. Hopefully I'll be able to apply the lessons I learned here for Snappy Touch's next release. ■

Making Western Casual

Golden Trails: The New Western Rush *Postmortem*

by Oleg Rogovenko

Oleg Rogovenko is the founder and CEO of Awem studio, an entertainment company which is reputed to be one of the strongest casual games developers in Eastern Europe.

Oleg started making games as a college student in 1999 and in 2002 founded his own company which became one of the leading casual games developers. Awem Studio doubles each year, and now more than 50 highly-skilled specialists work under its roof.

Oleg is the producer of all Awem studio projects, including such titles as The Island: Castaway, Letters from Nowhere, Cradle of Rome 1 & 2, Romance of Rome, Golden Trails, Cradle of Persia *and* Star Defender 1–4. *Oleg defines the company's strategy, explores new business opportunities and is responsible for business operations. Oleg can be reached at oleg.rogovenko@casualconnect.org*

Golden Trails: The New Western Rush is the first title in a series of games which will highlight one of the brightest and most prominent themes of human civilization. With over 14 months of development and a significant team effort, *Golden Trails* is the most expensive project ever undertaken by Awem Studio and was an experiment on many levels, with many lessons learned. It goes without saying that everything couldn't be all milk and honey, and we met some challenges and even difficulties during the development of *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush.* After its release, we sat back and reflected on our experience, analyzing several key areas of development.

Our Decision to Make a Western-themed Game

Our goal with *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush* was to make a genre not typically found in casual games popular for the casual games audience. It was risky. We understood that many casual gamers do not enjoy the elements typical of a western themed game, and we wanted *Golden Trails* to change this.

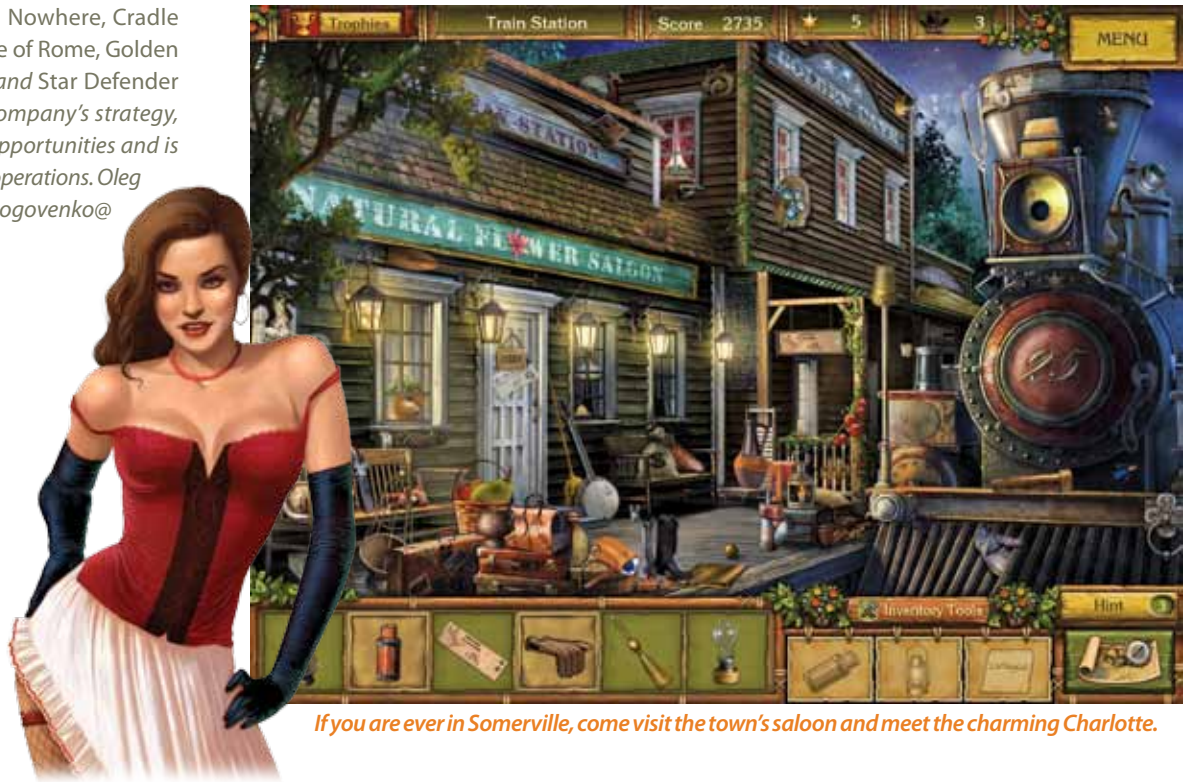
Most people associate the Western theme with brutality, hardship, gunfights and face-to-face shootouts. When we initiated the *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush* project, our main idea was to make the western theme casual, revealing characteristics of the genre that you don't see in movies.

Initially, making a western-themed game appeared to be a very challenging task, but as development moved forward, we discovered a very rich theme with a lot of room for imagination and creativity.

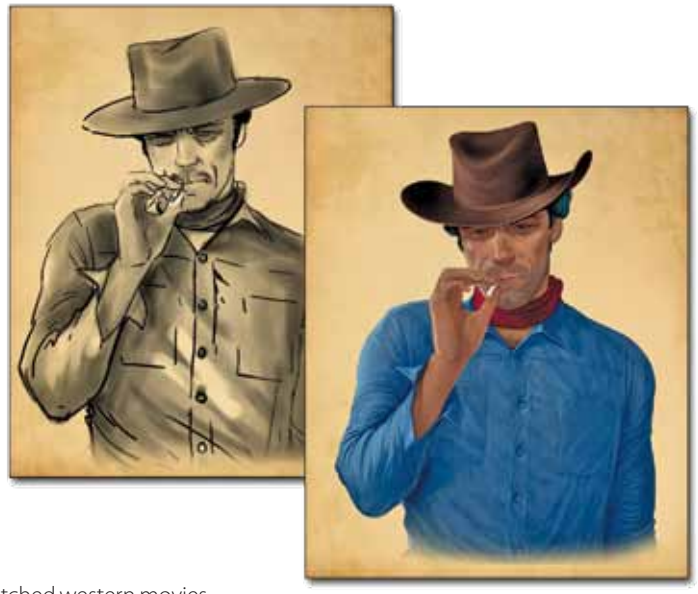
Developing the Plot

Story is a vital part of any game experience. Creating a unique yet true to life plot was one of the most interesting parts of the game's development. We introduced a brief bio which describes each character's traits and personal secrets. Thus, each character adds depth to the plot and brings unexpected twists and turns to events in the game.

Beyond the detective storyline, we decided to spice up the game with a bit of romance and humor and a pinch of brutality, creating not only a crime investigation game but also a true wild west experience.



If you are ever in Somerville, come visit the town's saloon and meet the charming Charlotte.



▲ *Cowboy Joe is a true cowboy; he is brave, rude and adventurous. Every detail of his appearance conveys his character.*

Characters

Once we settled on a wild west setting for the game, it was essential to inhabit our small rural town with the most definitive wild west characters. Each character is a remarkable and integral part of the game; some of them make the story, while others add a true western flavor to the game play experience. The characters include Charlotte, a pretty dance hall girl; the adventurous Cowboy Joe; brave Sheriff Jack; and Mr. Taylor, a greedy and self-interested banker.

Choice of Scene Locations

Before deciding on the scene locations for *Golden Trails*, the entire team watched western movies over and over, immersing ourselves in the atmosphere of that time and paying close attention to the tiniest details, such as surface textures, wallpaper patterns, and décor items. We used some of the most distinctive scenes associated with the wild west: The Grand Canyon, an Indian camp, a stable, and a sheriff's office, to name a few.

Houses and buildings are chiefly made of wood and are typical of small, western settlements. At the same time, we tried to offset the dusty Western look by adding bright and lively elements, rich in color.

There are 45 scenes in *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush*. The main game includes five episodes with 32 locations to explore. There are five more levels in the Secret Mission and eight in the Bonus Challenges.

The first variant of the Bank was of typical western construction. However, it was too simple and flat and looked like a Hollywood set, so we changed the whole construction and made the place a bit warmer and lively, filled with soft and welcoming colors. ▼

Art Style and Its Role in Creating the Atmosphere

Artwork not only defines the appearance of a game, it creates the atmosphere and influences the player's perception of the game. While working on the graphics for *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush*, the game designers along with the artists decided to try an experiment: The art for the game would be drawn in an entirely new and different style from that of *Cradle of Rome* or *Romance of Rome*. All of the artwork in *Golden Trails* is hand-drawn; we refused to use 3D art; hand-drawing was essential for our experiment. It looks a bit cartoonish, but at the same time it conveys a sense of reality. The main objective was to create a "here and now" feel for the player, and we believe that we achieved our goal.

Training the Newcomers

Along with the *Golden Trails* project came company growth—we hired several new team members. *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush* began with a team of 12; six of them were new hires who had never even worked in the game industry. Having so many inexperienced team members was a risky step. Much time was spent not only on the development of the game itself but on training the new staff.

◄ *Neil Barrow's Mansion. Neil Barrow is one of the richest men in the city. We had to create a luxurious house for him. Our first attempt at his living room depicted a room of generous proportions with sumptuous leather furniture and a huge window. But our task was to keep to the country style. We changed the concept and added wooden elements, such as wood staircase, wood floors and ceiling, elements of wood in furniture, and even the luxurious chandelier is made of wood.*

Outsourcing Art

Initially, we decided to outsource the art and graphics in order to save time and effort. When we placed the art in the game, however, although the graphics were high quality, we realized that the game had lost its continuity. We learned that it can be very difficult to convey a vision to someone not intimately involved with a project. The art

Making Western Casual

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did not suit the mood and the style we wanted for our game so we had to refuse the outsourced art and create our own.

Testing, Changing and Adding to the Game

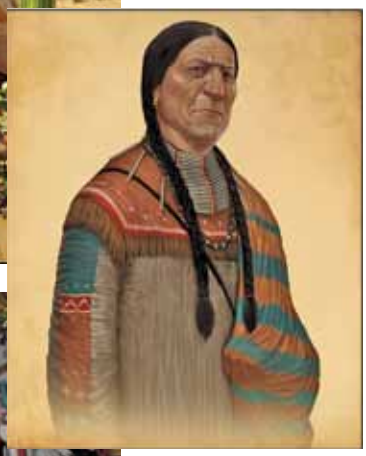
By the time the locations for the third and fourth episodes were ready and tested in the game, we realized that some locations created during the earlier stages of the development looked a bit simple and plain when compared with the newer scenes. Over time, our quality requirements had increased, and these older scenes didn't meet the standards any longer. So we had to make the decision to redraw the locations to bring them up to the new standard.

Beta testing is a great way to get feedback from our players to understand what they really want to see in a game and analyze unnoticed shortcomings to improve the game. Following the beta test of *Golden Trails*, we received great suggestions from our focus group and we subsequently worked many of their ideas into the game.

Namely, our beta testers remarked that the gameplay lacked variety. Shooting down gangsters was welcomed by our focus group. The comment, "Hey, I loved shooting those bad guys!" actually inspired us to introduce a new type of mini-game. Thus, Shooting Gallery was added to the game, which helped not only to extend game play but also emphasized the western theme and revealed our players' wild west spirit.

At this point in development, however, the team consisted of 17 people and we had to work against the clock to meet the deadline and not overrun the budget to incorporate these additions and changes.

We introduced the Secret Mission which presented five more locations to prolong the storyline, and we also added an Unlimited Mode to increase the replay value, and we stuffed the game with extra goodies such as Bonus Challenges, themed wallpapers, original soundtracks and more. All of these elements helped to increase play time and game quality.



***Although the Tribe Chief is not the main character of the game, he adds greatly to the game atmosphere. He is one of the most authentic characters of* Golden Trails: The New Western Rush.**

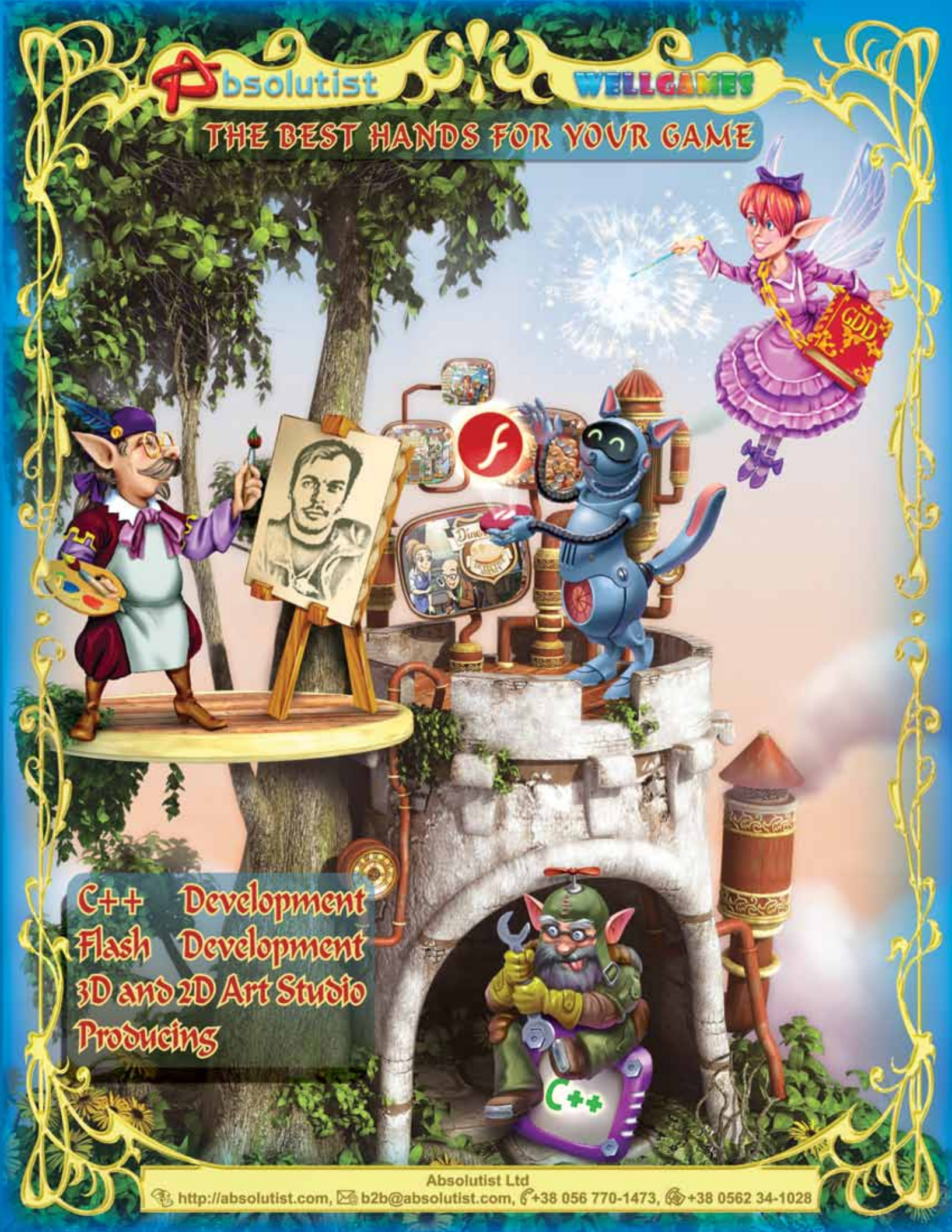
Development Cycle

It took us more than 14 months to build *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush*. Actually, the game was ready by the beginning of March, but we spent four months polishing and refining it. That is a long development cycle in the casual games industry, but it could have been much longer. Our statistics reveal the entire team squeezed 120 man-months into 14 calendar months!

While working on *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush* we were also designing a new project development cycle. It took time to revalue and set the milestones of the development cycle. We trained new staff and developed our technical resources. All these factors influenced the length of the development.

Conclusion

In spite of all the difficulties and challenges we experienced during the development of *Golden Trails: The New Western Rush*, we feel it was a rewarding experience for the company. The team worked out a new development cycle, which will help us increase production without sacrificing quality and release future games within six months. We created and trained a cohesive and reliable team. We risked bringing the western theme to casual gamers. As a result, we got valuable feedback from our fans and publishers. Golden Trail's success was the result of a dedicated team who invested themselves entirely in the project. We are looking forward with much enthusiasm to our next project, *Golden Trails* 2. ■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Let Me Tell You a Story

Five Principles of Creating a Great Story Inside a Game

by Igor Elovikov

I play games all the time, on all possible platforms. Some games I like much better than others. I'm a typical gamer in constant search of something new. When buying yet another game, I'm always intrigued whether it will 'click' with me. Largely due to this fact, I try to lead the production at Playrix with our end customers in mind, our players. With today's casual games market being oversaturated, players tend to be a rather sophisticated audience waiting to be surprised.

While working on each new game at Playrix, we always hope that it will resonate with our players, that it will hold their interest and keep them captivated for a long time. Over the years we've realized that the success of our games depends, to a great extent, on the story inside the game and the way this story is presented. It's obviously important how the game starts and ends, but the way it develops and, above all, what impact it makes on the hearts and minds of the players is equally crucial. Good story enriches the game and makes the player return to the game again and again. And vice versa: bad story (a story that is not well crafted or poorly thought out) is capable of killing an otherwise great product with quality graphics and technical innovations.

With today's casual games market being oversaturated, players tend to be a rather sophisticated audience waiting to be surprised.

The purpose of this essay is to sum up and illustrate the principles that we at Playrix worked out by trial and error and which we use for creating a story inside a game.

Igor Elovikov is Playrix's VP of Production. He graduated with a Master's degree in Computer Science from Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University. His passion for games development became a profession and in 2006 he joined Playrix as Head of Production. Since then, Igor has led production of all Playrix games including Gardenscapes™, *the* Fishdom™ *series,* Call of Atlantis™, Royal Envoy™ *and others. Igor played a crucial role in establishing and strengthening Playrix's reputation as one of the world's leading casual games developers and publishers. He can be contacted via email at elovikov@playrix.com.*

Script: Leave some room for spontaneity

After a dozen successful projects, we came to realize that during the pre-production stage the script is only needed in the form of a general outline without many details. At the start, it is enough to know how the game begins, how it ends, and what key events take place in the game. I can recall a few times when the number of main characters changed in the course of production. Flexibility is important here because sometimes the story controls the game and not the other way around.

One of our latest projects, *Royal Envoy,* illustrates this point. This game is a mixture of several game genres—strategy, time management and sim. In a nutshell, *Royal Envoy*'s plot is the following: the player is sent to rebuild the King's province, Islandshire, which was devastated by a natural disaster. Traveling by sea from island to island, the player

Far left: Map of the Pirate Island
Left: Young Tippy won the hearts of the players

Let Me Tell You a Story

Five Principles of Creating a Great Story Inside a Game

restores damaged towns, building homes and town buildings. While working on this title, one of our game designers came up with a twist to the game's storyline: A pirate ship attacks the player's vessel which results in the appearance of a new original island—the Pirate Island. It ended up being one of the most memorable moments in the game, but most importantly, this move created a new main character—Tippy, the young pirate girl. As the user reviews demonstrated, Tippy was a great success among players and managed to bring freshness and a certain emotional touch to the game's story.

Characters: Make sure their creators truly like them

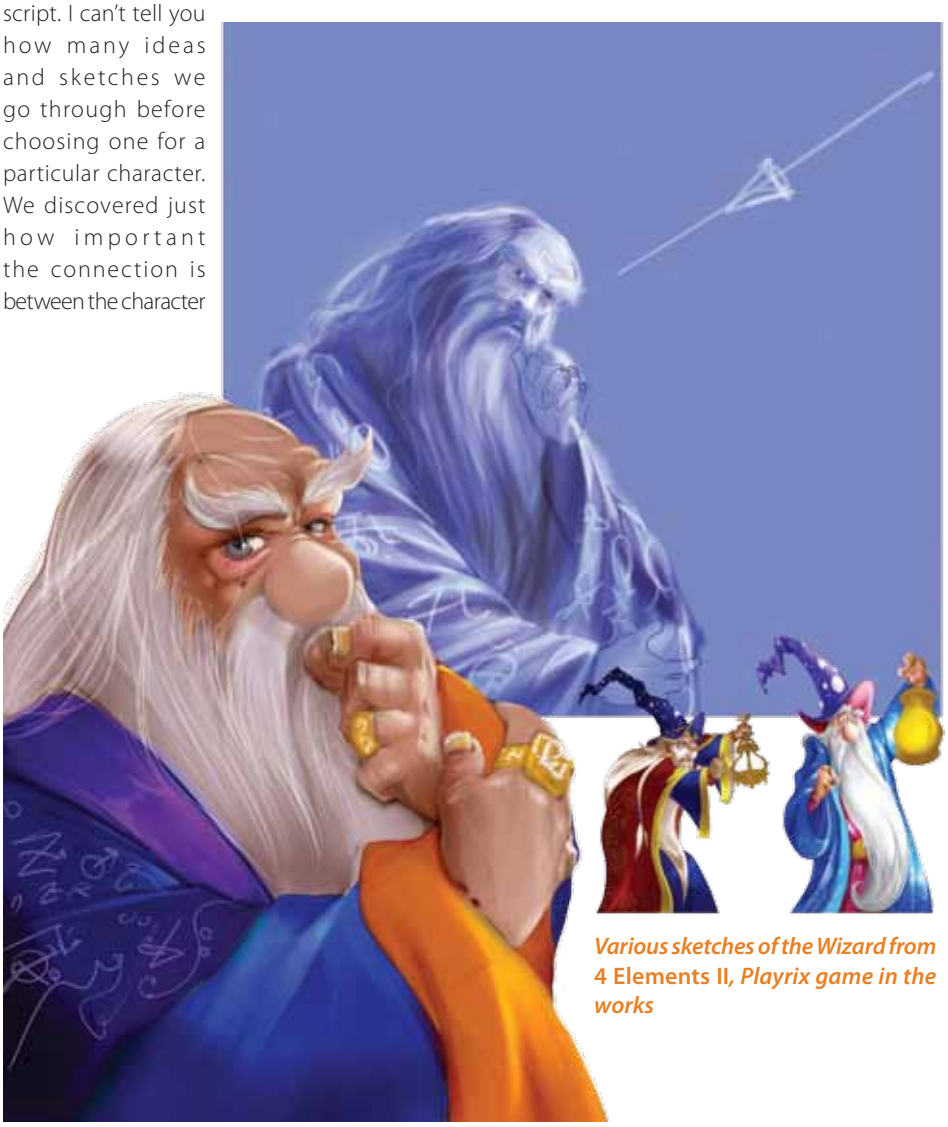
Characters are a crucial element in a game's script. I can't tell you how many ideas and sketches we go through before choosing one for a particular character. We discovered just how important the connection is between the character and its creators—the people who will breathe life into it: game designers, artists, and animators.

The creation of any character includes a period of discussions and brainstorming for the whole team. There have been situations in which the concept I liked best for a particular character did not end up making the final cut because the team did not share my view. There have also been situations where true masterpieces came out of concepts I didn't care for at all, precisely due to the fact that the team got the character it had been working on just right.

Gameplay: Make sure the story is engrained in it

We believe it is not enough to present the story at the beginning of the game, on the loading screen or introductory texts. Gameplay must also be filled, albeit subtly, with the story you are telling the player. Foisting the story off on the player in the form of comics or text dialogues between game levels makes the player feel bored and eager to skip the texts as soon as possible. This format is basically saying: "Hello, Player. This is how our story develops. Please be informed." Truth be told, in one of our games, *Around the World in 80 Days,* we did implement this very format: short 'comics' with dialogues were shown to the player before the beginning of each level. Players confessed those were pretty boring.

In *Gardenscapes*, we took a different approach. The story moved forward using an animated 3D-character, Austin the Butler, in a fully interactive environment. It was balanced in such a way that players ended up getting carried away with Austin's witty remarks and behavior on the game field—some confessed they'd purposely wait for him to say or do something before moving on in the game.



Various sketches of the Wizard from* 4 Elements II*, Playrix game in the works

Cut Scenes: A non-interactive but effective way to present story

Cut scenes in a game can be helpful in presenting the story to the player. One should use this technique with caution, however, as there is nothing more harmful for a title's success than to fill it with movies that are dragged out, too frequent or simply uninteresting. The movie should be short, informative and most importantly, capable of evoking strong emotions.

The way we use cut scenes has evolved with time, but since the very beginning we understood that the then-dominant format of comics cannot fully implement our main goal—that of presenting the story to the players in a way that it inspires them as opposed to putting them to sleep.

Emotions: Evoke them with small details

If a game doesn't make the player experience any emotions, it won't be successful. If you are bored while playing your own game, it's a very bad sign. To trigger emotional response and create a unique atmosphere is not easy. To achieve this, try focusing on small things: tiny details that altogether mold into a bigger picture and create that personal environment. Call the player by their name during emotionally charged scenes and address them in person.

There are people among our colleagues who possess a particularly developed emotional intellect and are able to make an idea a reality in the most subtle and precise way by filling it with a myriad of important personal details. We are lucky to have ssome of these people on our team. They keep surprising us, building up entire universes out of well-crafted details. It's these small things that trigger an emotional response in a player.

Conclusion

All these principles were formed during the course of several years of game development. They work for us and help us create successful games. We use them to implement our ideas into reality in the best possible way. We have realized that a great story can dramatically increase a game's value, and if we don't prioritize it high enough, the player's impression of an otherwise perfect game can be hopelessly spoiled. That rich personal atmosphere we strive for in our games is largely based on our attention to detail and our recognition of the importance of stories inside the games. It is our goal to communicate story to players in such a way that they keep coming back to the game again and again while still discovering something new each time they do so. ■

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▲ *Small details matter: photo album from* Farmscapes, *Playrix game in the works.*

Interactive approach: dialogues between characters in Farmscapes, *Playrix game in the works* ▶

Dialogues in Around the World in 80 Days ▼

Clearly We Had a Lot to Learn

Lessons from Our Venture into Browser Gaming

by Mark Mikulec

Mark Mikulec is co-founder and technical director of Antic Entertainment. As an entrepreneur he has won two separate business plan competitions for both companies he founded. His first company, founded in university, licensed his game engine and/or online project management system to various academic institutions across North America, including the University of California at Berkeley. As a game developer he's been making games since the mid-'90s and has worked on notable titles such as Bioshock *and* Dark Sector. *Holding a bachelors in Computer Science and Intelligent Systems, Mark enjoys speaking at industry conferences and teaching game development part time at Fanshawe College in London, Canada—when he's not busy cracking the nerd whip at Antic. Mark can be reached at mark.mikulec@casualconnect.org*

Way back in 2008, there was a growing, gaping hole in the game industry. AAA titles were getting bigger. Teams were commonly several hundred strong, and budgets in the eight digits were becoming the norm. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, people were getting comfortable escaping into fun, simple games written in JavaScript or Flash on their Web browser. As Internet technologies became more advanced, Jeff Evans and I realized that we could close the divide between casual and hardcore gaming. We took our observation of the industry shift and an idea for the game we'd always wanted to make—*Junk Battles*—to Fredrik Liliegren, original CEO of DICE. Together, we built Antic Entertainment and started making *Junk Battles* a reality.

Junk Battles is a free-to-play, customizable vehicle, multi-player action-strategy game. That's a mouthful, so let's simplify. What do you do when you play *Junk Battles*? You collect junk, build a craft with that junk and battle opponents with your creations in real time. Suffice it to say it is not your grandma's *Sudoku* or match-three game. Built for the Web, *Junk Battles* is targeted at a relatively new audience of browser gaming: hardcore players.

We envisioned a world where there were no publishers to deal with, no crazy late night coding sessions, and games that paid us to make them.

But why would we do such a thing? Browser gaming has been targeted at those who need a bit of a distraction from homework, chores, or the boardroom—that is, the casual player. A study showcased at Casual Connect in 2008[1] suggested that the vast majority of hardcore players play casual games on the Internet in addition to traditional shooter and sports games on their consoles. My colleagues and I saw an untapped medium and instead of developing the game for the Wii as originally planned, we decided to create a Flash-based browser game.

Our decision somehow pigeonholed *Junk* as a casual product—so unknowingly we console developers slipped on the browser banana peel and fell over to this side of the industry. On the way down we expected to have a soft, cushy landing in a dream-world where development would be as simple and approachable as the games themselves. We envisioned a world in which there were no publishers to deal with, no crazy late night coding sessions, and games that paid us to make them.

Boy, were we wrong. Clearly, we had a lot of lessons to learn—four in particular.

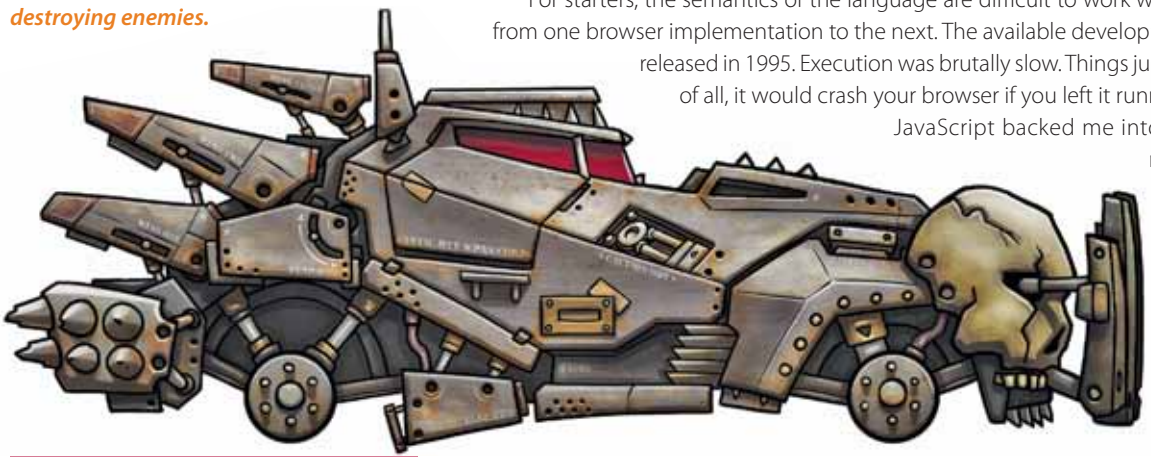
Lesson 1: Avoid JavaScript if You Can

Junk Battles began its life as a Web 2.0 application. It was all PHP generated JavaScript, with Ajax calls for retrieving dynamic data. The whole point of this choice in technology was accessibility: We wanted anyone in the world with a modern browser to just load up the page and start playing—no plug-in download required. Too bad JavaScript had other plans, none of which included handling a real-time game.

For starters, the semantics of the language are difficult to work with. Properties were different from one browser implementation to the next. The available development tools felt like they were released in 1995. Execution was brutally slow. Things just randomly broke. And worst of all, it would crash your browser if you left it running for too long.

JavaScript backed me into a corner and clubbed me nearly to death. I felt I was in programmer rehab for four months, learning how to crawl, then stumble, then walk again. Barely. The good thing was that we had a fun, working prototype of our game to play on the local network in the office. The

Junk Battles: ***The player's goal is to build a fighting machine for destroying enemies.***



bad thing was that it was just a prototype. I swallowed my pride, hit control-A, took a deep breath as I hit delete, and started from scratch writing the game client in Flash and the server in C++.

JavaScript eventually made a minor return to the game out of necessity to support Facebook integration. Even with JavaScript playing a minor role in the bigger picture of our game development, it was not uncommon to hear sighs and groans coming from the developers that had to work with it. So the lesson is: If you can avoid JavaScript, do so.

▲ *The player has a wide range of weapons that can be installed on the vehicle.*

Lesson 2: Launch the Minimum Viable Product

Shortly after porting the prototype to Flash and C++, we ramped up to full production of the game. It took Antic eight months to get to launch day, peaking at six team members on the project. Picking a date to launch was a very difficult and stressful decision to make.

Why? Because the game was nowhere near done when we launched.

For a browser game, *Junk Battles* is fairly deep and complex. As a team, we had ambitious features planned; but to implement them all would have taken many more months—if not years—to complete. Before we went too far down the rabbit hole, we needed to know if our unique game design had any legs at all.

We had to unlearn the age-old tradition of perfect and polish to 100 percent. In the traditional gaming industry, an AAA title typically has a massive schedule as well as many people and years to complete. During the waning months of development, it is up to the publisher's marketing team to convince you to give them your hard earned money—up front—for their game. Marketing does this by way of interviews, teaser trailers, television advertisements, posters, booth babes—whatever medium they can muster to raise the hype for their game leading up to launch day and shortly beyond. When Billy goes to Game Stop and exchanges 60 dollars for that game, he's going to be pretty pissed off if it sucks. And because we live in a culture in which sharing complaints is how we bond, he'll also tell 10 times more people just how bad the game is than a person who liked the game would sing its praises. It's sink or swim in the traditional game model. Great games stay on the shelves for months. Crappy ones are in the bargain bin in weeks. You only get one chance at success.

The free-to-play, browser-based world is a very different one indeed. Currently there are almost two *billion*[2] people (that's nine zeroes) connected to the Internet. And I can bet you good money that every single one of them has used at least a Web browser. When one of these folks stumbles upon *Junk Battles* or any other free-to-play game, there is little barrier to entry. In fact, 98 percent of them[3] will have Flash already installed, so it only takes a few clicks to enter and begin playing the game. That's perhaps the beauty and the curse of browser-based gaming, especially when you throw in the visibility of social networks like Facebook—with higher traffic you reach not only more of your target audience, but also more of those who really aren't into your offering.

In simple terms, if players are intrigued by the premise, they'll check it out. If they hate the game or experience errors, the only investment they've made is time, and they will likely close the browser or move along to another website without a second thought. If they enjoy it, they'll stick around and may even come back and tell their friends. If they love it, they'll keep coming back and perhaps invest some money in it.

The lesson? Take a good look at your game, decide on a minimum list of key features required to make it a viable product, and launch it. It might not be finished, but you'll find out soon enough if it's worth investing any more time and money to take to completion.

Lesson 3: Just Do (Most of) it Live

When you are a small team, there isn't anything more valuable than the developer's time. Time is money after all.

Clearly We Had a Lot to Learn

Lessons from Our Venture into Browser Gaming

▲ *A typical battle scene from the game.*

A couple thousand dollars extra in development costs can be a significant percentage increase if your total budget is low to begin with. The previous lesson's idea of abandoning perfection and polish in favor of getting the game launched also holds true for both bugs and optimizations—if it's good enough, and fun enough, doggone it people might just like it!

Which is why Bill O'Reilly became our inspiration. When the Internet meme of the American right-winged news pundit losing his cool[4] on camera went viral, it made a lot of people laugh. His frustration of not being able to get his lines right before going on the air and just doing it live became a mantra for Antic's development process. We realized that sometimes you just have to stop the in-house focus testing. Stop hunting for that one obscure bug that is difficult to reproduce. Forget about trying to simulate server load to catch bottlenecks, which might not even be accurate in the first place. Much like parenting, there comes a time to just let your code out into the world, see what happens, and hope you've prepared it for what's to come.

This part doesn't always go well—while certain technologies (like PHP) can be fixed on the fly, some cannot. I would not recommend just "doing it live" on anything written in C++. Make sure you have a good build system with adequate unit and smoke testing to ensure that the one little bug fix a programmer submitted doesn't crash the software. To keep things lighthearted, but still demonstrate a clear value on a 100 percent working build, we have build breakers wear an actual soldier's helmet until the build is fixed. The Web is stateless and things can be fixed with a simple refresh. C++ is not; when a server crashes it will take everything down, and *all* of your users will notice it. Flash is a little more forgiving in this respect. If a critical error occurs, the player may not notice it all, which in some cases can lead to undefined behavior. Having a good data tracking system can help in this regard.

Lesson 4: It's Less About Gaming and More About Engagement

That above statement may shock you. "But Mark," you say. "Isn't it *all* about the game?" Don't get me wrong—Antic's first priority is to make games that are enjoyable and fun to play. That should always be the first objective of any gaming company. But when a new player can just hit the close button or move away from the webpage never to return, you have to take steps to ensure that it never happens.

One technique that has worked well for us is to minimize the loading bars. People hate waiting in general. However they'll tolerate waiting seconds, minutes, even hours if they've already invested money in a console game. They have already paid the money, and the more time they spend in the game the more worthwhile the investment. This is the complete opposite with free-to-play browser games, which are considered by many as just another website. In this case, time itself is the primary currency.

There have been several studies on the impact of performance and visitor retention[5]. In Flash and other plug-in browser technologies, you stream as much content in the background as possible. However there is a balance here—the more you stream, the poorer your initial experience to the user is, since everything will be downloaded and cached on their local machine over time, popping onto the screen randomly. In *Junk Battles* we still have a loading bar, but we only embed the most fundamental UI assets to ensure the user can be functional in the game as soon as the initial load is complete. All other game assets are streamed in as required.

In addition, you mustn't be afraid to give out things for free in order to keep players engaged. In *Junk Battles*, you travel around the in-game world, leveling up and collecting metal. Metal is the

free in-game currency that can be used for purchasing a portion of all available parts in the game world. Roughly half of all parts can be obtained simply by grinding through the game. But wait, there's more! One of the primary draws in *Junk Battles* is the collection aspect. It's about having the best collection of premium parts—not only as a proof of status, but also to win more battles. To give players a taste of the experience they could have if they actually spent some money, we made a conscious decision to award premium items and premium currency (oil)—in order to entice players to their put in real money to purchase the whole part set, or to bring new players into the game to receive more free parts as a reward. It's no skin off your back to provide a few free items for the chance of building a loyal fan base that keeps playing your game, telling others about it, and giving you cash to get more stuff.

The beauty of having a game that is always connected to your network is that you can spy on what your players are doing. This might sound devious, but it is absolutely critical if you want to maximize player engagement—capturing and fixing bugs, seeing where people are spending the most time and money, and observing a player's overall experience. All of this data helps us make decisions about how to keep our target market—that is, the people who actually play our game—happy and coming back for more.

Be a big brother. Listen, record and analyze. Then make necessary changes to increase engagement with the user. Recognize that sometimes you have to put the ego aside and just do what the data says. If everyone is spending all their time in an area of the game that was initially considered a minor feature, enhance that feature. If one particular type of virtual good is selling like hotcakes, make more variations of that virtual good. Your players will become fans; they will want to come back time and time again. The resulting boost in user retention rate and the increase in daily active users directly affects your bottom line.

***Have you tuned your vehicle up? No? Then here we come!* ▼**

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Conclusion

What did we learn by jumping into the deep end of browser-based game development? Well, much like ebony and ivory, hardcore and casual gaming can coincide in harmony—and there is a huge opportunity in the market for others to develop a game that the guys who love their AAA titles will play right alongside a *Bejeweled* junkie.

We now know that developing a browser-based title is not a walk in the park. It has its own set of challenges and problems, and requires a different way of thinking. You need to know what tools are out there and use what works—or figure out how to work with what you have. Let go of perfection, because despite what your parents told you, you'll never achieve it. Instead realize that your goal is to make sure that you have alignment between the audience you want and the game you want to make, then bring your audience into the development process by launching before the game is perfect and asking for their feedback.

Remember that you need to be nimble, reactive and proactive all at the same time. Sooner or later those people who helped you build a game they love will start to pay for it. Let me repeat that. The people who give you valuable help to develop the game they want—and you want to make—will give you money. How awesome is that?! ■

1 Disaggregating the Casual Games Industry", Paul Thelen; Casual Connect 2008 keynote presentation
2 http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
3 http://www.adobe.ca/products/player_census/flashplayer/version_penetration.html
4 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tJjNVVwRCY
5 http://www.stevesouders.com/blog/2009/10/06/business-impact-of-high-performance/

The Pros and Cons of 3D Graphics

Considerations and Commentary

by Ivan Bralić and Krešimir Špes

Ivan Bralić is the co-owner, executive producer and art director at Cateia Games. He has been producing, writing and designing for Cateia Games since 2004. He has worked on games such as: The Legend of Crystal Valley, Hotel, King's Legacy, Family Secrets: GhostHunters *and many more. Ivan has a Masters degree in Fine Arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, Italy. He can be reached at: ivanbralic@casualconnect.org.*

Krešimir Špes is co-owner, producer and lead programmer at Cateia Games since 2004. He has worked on all Cateia Games' titles for PC, Mac, iPhone and Linux including: The Legend of Crystal Valley, Iron Roses, Kaptain Brawe: A Brawe New World, *and others. Krešimir has a Masters degree from the University of Electronics and Computing (FER) in Zagreb, Croatia. He can be reached at kresimirspes@casualconnect.org.*

Although hardcore 3D games aren't a novelty,, casual game developers have stuck to 2D graphics much longer. And with good reason. In most cases, it is far easier to make a 2D game than a 3D game—especially if you're developing browser-based or mobile games.

But technology moves forward at a fast pace. Now, 3D accelerated graphics are commonplace, even in the casual games space. So now casual game developers face a decision almost every time they begin developing a new title: To go 3D or not. The question is: How do you decide?

Hardware Considerations

Virtually every computer made within the last decade has a display card capable of 3D acceleration. Without that display card, 3D isn't possible. (OK, so that's not completely true; but software-based 3D graphic solutions are horribly slow and eat CPU.) Chances are, if your computer has a 3D display card, it came from one of these manufacturers: nVidia, ATI, or Intel.

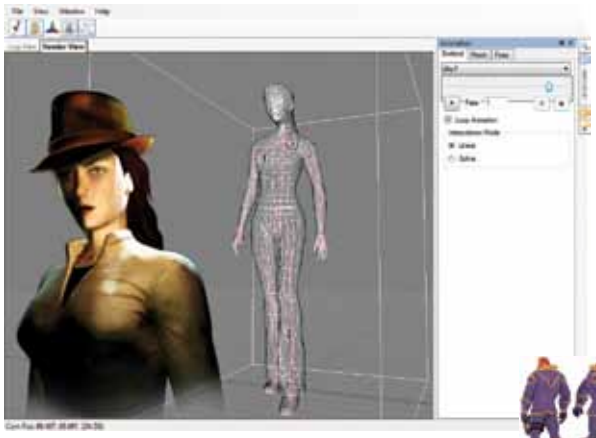
Intel display cards are the most appealing to casual game developers since they are the cheapest and most common (standard in low-end laptops and desktop computers). Since casual gamers don't require the super-fast computers and laptops that hardcore gamers prefer, most likely your target audience will have lower-end Intel display cards with shared memory. These cards are generally much slower than contemporary nVidia or ATI cards, but even so, they are more than capable of running a decent-looking 3D game.

Now casual game developers face a decision almost every time they begin developing a new title: To go 3D or not. The question is: How do you decide?

Programming Considerations

For programming 3D graphics, there are two main choices: DirectX and OpenGL. At their core, both pretty much perform the same, but with different APIs. DirectX runs on all versions of Windows, Windows mobile and Xbox platforms. OpenGL runs best on Linux, Mac, and iOS devices. In determining which solution to use, you need to consider several things:

***APRIL™ is Cateia Games' multiplatform framework behind all newer Cateia Games' titles like* Kaptain Brawe: A Brawe New World *and* Family Secrets: Ghosthunters. ►**



◄ *Biggi Brightstone from* Hotel. *A 3D character with a skeleton and animation list (30 frames per second).*

Kaptain Brawe—one of the main protagonists' animation textue in our 2D adventure game Brawe New World. *Even though frames are densely packed, it still consumes lots of RAM.* ▼

- OpenGL doesn't always run well on Windows with default drivers. OS default drivers often disable or cripple OpenGL hardware acceleration. DirectX, on the other hand, always works.
- Don't use anything higher then DirectX 9. Later versions won't work on Windows XP. Many casual gamers still use that OS and will continue to do so for years to come.
- DirectX gives you the whole package (audio, video, animation support, effects, fonts, GUI, etc.), while OpenGL only gives you an interface to the display card.

As a resource for programmers, we have developed an in-house, open-source, C++ solution we call the APRIL™ library (source repository hosted on SourceForge.net). It serves as an interface between the programmer and the graphics API—so that you can compile your game using either OpenGL or DirectX without changing a single line of code in your game. APRIL enables us to deliver our games with DirectX9 on Windows and OpenGL on iOS, Linux and MacOSX devices, thus ensuring maximum compatibility on each platform.

A simple texture used on a 3D model in King's Legacy*—a full 3D game.*

Nevertheless . . .

At this point you may have come to the conclusion that there are more cons than pros when it comes to using full 3D graphics in your game. Well, there's a bright side to all of this. It's obvious that 3D acceleration is advanced technology and that you'll need skilled and experienced programmers and artists who can handle it, but in the end, it's well worth the effort.

Using 3D or hybrid 2D/3D graphics can greatly improve your game's appearance while using significantly less RAM to achieve the same (if not better) visual appearance. Let's say you need a character with ten different animations, ten different poses and in eight directions, having both day and night illumination in your game. Do the math: That's a lot of images you'll need to produce for a single character. Now imagine that you have two, three, or even ten characters in your game, each and every one of which will need the same number of images. Thanks, but no thanks!

If you were making each character with a 3D modeling tool, however, you could create those images much more easily. You would need to create the ten animations and the ten poses, but everything else would be a piece of cake. Since you can rotate models anyway you like in any angle you want in a 3D environment, there are no fixed directions. You can even interpolate between animations and poses as you wish. You can change the ambient light in a 3D scene which will also affect the characters. You can even scale it in all three dimensions without losing the quality of the character, because in 3D you have much fewer resolution constraints compared to 2D graphics.

Once you get the hang of 3D graphic design, you'll save a lot of time, effort, megabytes and coding while getting much better results than doing the same thing in 2D. For example, in our 2D adventure game, *Kaptain Brawe: A Brawe New World*, the main character requires eight 1024x1024 textures to display several different animations in eight directions (which consumes 32MB of RAM). By contrast, the main 3D character in our 2D/3D adventure game *Hotel* requires just one 512x512

Using 3D or hybrid 2D/3D graphics can greatly improve your game's appearance while using significantly less RAM to achieve the same (if not better) visual appearance.

Potential Pitfalls

When developing 3D games, beware of the following:

1. Graphical Capabilities: Simple 3D operations like drawing polygons, texturing, and simple lighting are supported on all 3D display cards. However, advanced options like shaders and volume textures are supported only on newer cards. But it shouldn't matter much if you're developing casual 3D games. Since most casual gamers will have lower-quality display cards, you should slap yourself hard every time you have a great idea for an advanced graphical effect. If that doesn't help, slap yourself again!

It's safe to assume that more than half of your users won't be able to display advanced effects, so you can either "fake" the effect using supported techniques or provide a low-end version of the effect for those that can't display it. In fact, you'd be surprised what a little 2D art combined with properly placed polygons can do. In most cases you don't need to use advanced effects to make your game look awesome.

2. Textures: The textures you use in 3D or 2D rendering on a display card must have power-of-two dimensions (16, 32, . . . , 512,1024, etc.). What's more, if you want to use texture compression on the iPhone—and you do—then the dimensions of these textures also need to be square numbers (16, 64, 256, etc.).

(continued on pg. 65)

The Pros and Cons of 3D Graphics

Considerations and Commentary

texture (1MB), a 200kB 3D model and about 1MB of animation data. That's roughly 2.5MB compared to 32MB—a lifesaver on platforms with limited resources like the iPhone.

Likewise, rather than using textures or pre-rendered video files, you can create 3D cut scenes—rendered within your game's own engine—to further reduce the size of your game.

Some Final Comparisons

Some may say that 3D graphics can never equal the appeal of 2D pre-rendered images. We beg to differ! Although they may come with some restrictions, 3D graphics can be equally beautiful and as cute as anything created in 2D. (They can also be ugly as hell—it depends on the artists.) In some game genres, a 2D/3D hybrid is a perfect combination.

Bear in mind that with 3D you can do higher-quality animations and effects including: particles, lighting, real-time shadows, realistic water animation, clouds, weather effects (rain, snow) and much, much more. Basically, it's up to your concept artists to be as creative as possible.

Some may say that 3D graphics can never equal the appeal of 2D pre-rendered images.

In addition, working with 3D gives you freedom! It enables you to create a full 3D environment, navigate it, rotate it, and illuminate it. You can easily add particles and different blending for your textures, thus creating some very appealing effects that are difficult—if not impossible—to achieve in 2D. If something on the scene appears too big, or too small you can just set a different scale for that object and viola! It's done.

And of course, if you design your game-play carefully so that it works well in a 3D environment, your users will feel a sense of freedom as well since you can give them control over the camera, view, lights, animation speed, and so on.

Final Considerations

In the end, you may say to yourself: *A 3D game would be cool, but what about the development cost?* It's true that 3D is more complicated. And that means you'll need more time—and, of course, more money—to develop the game. But those cost implications are only temporary. Despite some problems and complications you may experience during 3D game development, you will soon discover that working with 3D is not more expensive than creating a 2D game. Once you get comfortable with your 3D tools and you plan your budget and milestones in detail, the *God of 3D* will be merciful to you and your team. Each problem you solve in the beginning will greatly reward you later in the development process.

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Good preparation can never be done overnight, but once you establish your pipeline . . . well, things will change big time.

So don't be afraid of 3D. Embrace it! 3D is the future. It looks cool. And it's here to stay. ■

▲ *In-game cut-scene from* Hotel*—2D/3D hybrid game.*

▲ *Lead characters from* Kingdom of Pharaoh *(in development)—full 3D characters.*

◄ *Screenshot from* King's Legacy *showing full 3D environment night / day dynamic illumination.*

It's true that 3D is more complicated. And that means you'll need more time—and, of course, more money—to develop the game. But those cost implications are only temporary.

Potential Pitfalls (continued)

Modern display cards support non power-of-two dimensions, but you can't count on that. This potentially creates a lot of empty space in textures, especially for 2D elements. So be careful how you package your 2D assets.

3. False Capabilities: Sometimes when a user has a bad driver (default OS display card drivers are the most common suspects), the driver will say that it supports a certain feature when, in reality, using that feature will crash either your app or the entire computer. We have experienced this with certain older models of Intel's display cards on Windows. These problems were so severe that we had to hardcode a check for that display card and disable any advanced effects if it was detected.

4. Camera (Point of View): Although 3D camera features (rotation, zoom, panning, scrolling) are standard in hardcore games, casual gamers will likely be a bit confused with this "innovation" since they are not used to having such freedom of view while playing games. To avoid this confusion, you can always lock the camera in place. But if you decide to give your users the freedom to control the camera, you should do this very carefully to avoid frustrating them. The usability of your 3D controls can mean the difference between success and failure of your game.

Ensuring the Best Game Experience For Consumers By Using the Right Tools

Maximizing Your Decisions in Casual Game Development

by Philip Belhassen

Philip Belhassen is the CEO of Stonetrip, creator of the ShiVa 3D Engine and game development tools. Belhassen co-founded Stonetrip in 2003 and previously worked in mobile and internet. philip.belhassen@casualconnect.org.

Game development, like any industry, has a flavor of the year when it comes to development choices: what genre to select, who to develop for, what platform to target and what technology to use . There are many mistakes that can be made along the way, so it is important to really think before you leap. Before jumping on the bandwagon du jour, even the most experienced should take a moment to think about platform interfaces, audience and technology,

Platform Interfaces

When determining platform, taking into account the target audience and the genre is imperative. Some game genres work best on particular platforms—anything requiring keyboard input is going to work better on PC or Mac than a dedicated games console. For example, real-time-strategy games generally don't work well on consoles despite interest from the Xbox360 or PlayStation 3 playing audience. PC is a more natural platform for this genre, considering the need for considerably more input through the interface. When creating a game for iPhone or Android, you have the touch screen interface to play with, but no physical buttons to press. This can make it more difficult to create a complex game with a high number of user inputs. This is by design, of course, given the mainstream audience of the platform, and it's great for casual games. Correspondingly, the dedicated motion-sensitive controllers for Wii and PlayStation 3 have brought active sports and FPS games to the forefront of development, and with them a level of physical involvement with a game that is not going to work when played on a touch screen smartphone on a crowded commuter train.

With so many options available in game development today, developers can find themselves swimming in a sea of choices

Audience

On new formats such as Facebook, iPhone and Android, developers must take into account that over half the users are women. On old-school games platforms, players were predominantly male, and developers created games to appeal largely to men. Today, however, according to Video Gamers In Europe 2010, published by the International Software Federation of Europe (ISFE) in June, female players outnumber male players on the Nintendo DS platform by a factor of 5:2; the gender split is roughly equal on iPhone, while Xbox and PlayStation 3 are still largely a male domain. And while women play largely similar types of games to men, 75 percent play puzzle, board and trivia games, compared to less than half (48 percent) of male gamers.

Younger gamers – and here the report means 16-19 year olds rather than children – are more likely to play online games, although 72 percent of all gamers reported playing an online game in the last three months. Often, when people think of online games, they think of MMOs first, yet Video Gamers In Europe 2010 claims that puzzle, board and trivia games is the most popular genre overall with 58 percent of gamers playing these online, compared to 26 percent playing MMOs.

Technology

Choosing a purpose-built engine sometimes can cut your financial outlay compared to building your own. Consider that more than 100,000 hours have gone into creating even the most basic of the commercial engines and one can quickly appreciate that it's often an easy choice to use middleware.

If you're looking to hit multiple platforms, you need to go through a process of getting certified by console companies, learning new SDKs for iPhone or Android, and meeting all their specific requirements so that your product will comply with standards ranging from file size to the code that is exported in C++.

There's also the consideration of how tech will affect the user experience. For example, the current 3G limit on iPhone title download size is 20MB. If your engine were to eat up 11 MB (which needs to be doubled since iPod Touch compatibility doubles the file size), you would never be able to sell your title to a consumer through the App Store on the iPhone. ■

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Now We're Talking

A Conversation with Ed Fries

What can we say about Ed Fries? After all, he's the guy who created Microsoft Game Studios, where he had a direct hand in more than a dozen games that sold over a million copies. He's the same guy who co-founded the Xbox project, for crying out loud. Then he served on the boards of a bunch of different publishers, developers, and media companies, and (as if that weren't enough) now he runs his own startup, FigurePrints, where they use 3D color printing technology to bring video game characters to life. We had all kinds of excuses to talk to this guy, so we did.

—ed.

Why did you make the move from business software to games?

I had been at Microsoft for ten years doing Office stuff—first as a programmer on Excel battling Lotus 1-2-3 (which was bigger than Microsoft when I started), and then as a dev manager battling WordPerfect with Word. Those were really fun, epic battles because we were the underdog, with smaller teams and fewer resources. The next step up for me at Microsoft was to become a business unit manager, which would have meant giving up programming—something I loved. So I thought about what else I loved. I had written and published games for the Atari 800 when I was younger and continued to play all of the latest games, so that was a natural choice for me. Also, the games group was so small compared to our competitors (only about 50 people) that it reminded me of the fun we had in the old days battling big entrenched companies.

Did you encounter any unexpected surprises when you made the initial transition to games?

When I made the choice to become the business unit manager of the games group I was immediately summoned into the offices of several VP's, who told me what a mistake I was making. One told me I was "committing career suicide." Another said, "Why would you leave one of the most important parts of the company to go work on something no one cares about?" It was kind of stressful! But I ignored them and took the job anyway. A week later I was in Tokyo meeting with all of my heroes from the game business. I visited Sega, Capcom, Konami, and Square. That night I was walking down the street in Tokyo—with all the bright lights shining down—and I realized I had the best job in the world.

After that I never looked back on the decision.

When I made the choice to become the business unit manager of the games group I was immediately summoned into the offices of several VPs who told me what a mistake I was making. One told me I was "committing career suicide."

As an advisor to many companies, you are exposed to a wide variety of exciting projects. What is your favorite project, and why?

Honestly, I don't have a favorite. My favorite thing is to be involved with lots of different things and to do my best to help them along. That's a lot like what my job was at Microsoft. I'd have 50 projects going at once—some really coming together, some complete disasters—and I'd just do what I could to help all of them.

Ed at BlizzCon. Now, he is Alliance.

What do you look for when assessing a business plan?

Personally I think plans and even ideas are overrated. I care much more about the people involved and the culture they create. That is really the secret to success in my mind. Plans change, but the people are the company.

Because I think that the team is more important than the idea, I also think that execution is more important than the idea. I would much rather see someone build a great team and execute well on something they are passionate about than try to follow industry trends. Doing what is fashionable at any given time is almost always a bad idea. The leaders need to trust themselves, ignore the people who are telling them they will fail, and build what they are excited about. When you can do that and do it well you will almost always be successful.

What should a new business look for in an advisor, and how should their advisors be compensated?

Advisors are the most important key to success, and you really can't pay them enough!

Okay, seriously. . .

It's impossible to be great at everything, so try to surround yourself with some people you can

learn from. Try to find advisors who fill in your areas of weakness and can provide some mentoring. In a big company you get lots of support from the people you work for and from other groups, but in a startup you are on your own.

Fortunately, most advisors are willing to work just for stock—which means they are taking a bet that you will be successful.

What can a startup do to ensure that it assembles the right team?

Because passion, talent, and culture are the most important things, make sure you don't hire someone who doesn't fit in with your group—even if he or she has a great résumé. And do fire people right away if you discover they don't fit. One problem person can cause a huge amount of damage that you really can't afford in a small company.

When starting a new company, is there any way to get some occasional downtime? Or do you pretty much have to assume that you'll be putting off friends and family and compromising your health until some point in the future?

A really important skill when you are running something is being able to manage your time well. Some people want to do a perfect job on everything—even the unimportant things—and that just kills them. My first manager at Microsoft would work eight hour days at a time when that was very rare at the company. But he ran one of the best groups in the company, got his job done, and had free time to pursue other passions. I learned a lot working for him.

What is the most common mistake people make when negotiating a publishing deal?

One common mistake is making decisions too soon. "I don't like that publisher so I won't pitch them"—that kind of thing. Why decide before you really know what your choices are? I'd much rather be at the end, staring at two contracts and saying, "I don't like these guys as much as the other guys, but they made me a much better offer." I would much prefer that dilemma to not having that choice at all. Be flexible. One publisher might want to wrap your game in an existing IP. Fine, that's a factor to consider at the end. Don't say, "We would never do that," only to find out later that you already said "no" to your only means of getting the game done.

What do you think of venture and angel funding?

Angel funding is the best kind of funding when you can get it, but it takes connections, and it's a hard way to raise a lot of money. Venture funding can come with a lot of strings attached, and the investors often push companies to grow faster than may be wise. In the game business, publishers are still the best choice for funding—at least on the console side. They have experienced teams that can help you build a better game, and they have the ability to market and distribute the finished product.

Then again, I've been on the boards of two different Silicon Valley chip startups—big, expensive companies that need tens of millions of dollars to run. For them, venture funding is really the only choice. For game companies we are lucky to have the publisher infrastructure (even if we don't always feel that way).

What is the last book you read that made a difference in your life?

Recently I read a book called *Racing the Beam* about programming the Atari 2600. That inspired me to brush off my (30-year-old) 6502 assembly skills and write a game for that old machine. The work was incredibly challenging but was also very rewarding. It reminded me of how much fun it is to create something from scratch and to breathe life into it. I just released the finished product—*Halo 2600*—and it's been really gratifying to see the response.

What advice do you regularly give?

I like to say, "If your job isn't fun, you're not doing it right." This is kind of a way to remind myself that my life and my happiness are my responsibility, not someone else's. ■

In front of his personal collection of WoW figures.

Doing what is fashionable at any given time is almost always a bad idea. The leader (or leaders) need to trust themselves, ignore the people who are telling them they will fail, and build what they are excited about. When you can do that and do it well you will almost always be successful.

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Facebook By the Numbers

An Analysis of Users Around the World

by Nick Berry

Nick Berry is the President of DataGenetics, a high-end consultancy firm specializing in data mining and privacy. Although educated as a rocket scientist and aircraft designer, Nick has worked in the casual games industry for over a dozen years, including over ten years at Microsoft, and more recently, as the GM for Analytics at GameHouse. Nick can be reached at nick.berry@casualconnect.org

In July of this year, Facebook announced that it had passed the 500 million registered members milestone. That's a pretty impressive statistic for a service that started only seven years ago. What's equally impressive is that Facebook appears to be still growing exponentially. As you can see in *Figure 1*, Facebook closed 2009 with 350 million accounts. Having reached the 500 million members milestone midway through this year, Facebook is on track to reach between 600 and 700 million members by the end of 2010.

This is not the complete story, however, as every region of the world is not blessed with the same level of Internet access. Recent estimates indicate that two billion people in the world have access to the Internet, which suggests that Facebook now has a relationship with over 25% of the Internet-connected world.

Facebook is on track to reaching between 600 and 700 million members by the end of 2010.

Figure 2 shows the top 25 countries based on registered Facebook accounts. Not surprisingly (considering Facebook's origin), the U.S. dominates the registration base with close to 26 percent of all Facebook accounts. The top 25 countries account for 80 percent of all of Facebook's registered accounts, with over half of all users living in the top seven.

The demographic breakdown between genders varies considerably among nations. Countries like the United States, Canada and the UK (and many of the "Western" countries) have more registered female accounts than male accounts. Indonesia, India, Turkey, Pakistan have a higher percentage of male registered accounts.

How these figures break down by age is even more interesting. *Figure 3* shows the composition of age and gender for Facebook accounts in the U.S. (Note that there are officially no accounts for users below 13 years of age for COPPA compliance reasons.) Female population is shown on the right, and male population on the left. The length of each bar represents the size of the population at this demographic.

The first thing to note is a modality of the peak around the late teens/early twenties. While Facebook is now popular across all age brackets, its roots as a college connection mechanism can still be seen in the distribution of users.

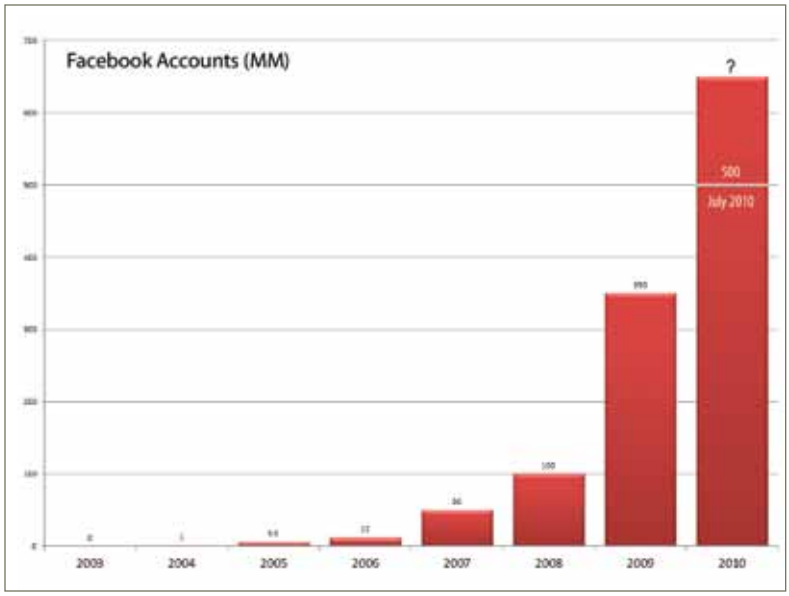
The second interesting thing to note is the very large size of the *65 and older* age bracket. In the U.S., there are now more women over the age of 65 on Facebook than there are women who are 20! (Not only is 65+ now the largest demographic segment in the US, it is also the fastest growing segment).

Different countries around the world have roughly similar "inverted pear" curves. Countries such as Canada, Australia, and the UK have very similar demographic Facebook user profiles. Non-Western countries, however, do not register as many accounts in the *65 and older* brackets.

Figure 4, for instance, shows Indonesia, whose Facebook user-base skews more male. In addition, the median age is much younger in Indonesia, with very few accounts past the age of 30. *Figure 5* shows India (another rapidly growing region for Facebook). Here the gender gap is even larger than in Indonesia, but there are slightly more middle-aged registrations.

Figure 6 shows the curve for the Russian Federation. While adoption on Facebook is currently smaller in this region than on other social networks, it is fascinating to view the

Figure 1—Year-end Facebook Accounts



Facebook By the Numbers

An Analysis of Users Around the World

#	Country	Male	Female	Total	WW Size	Ratio Male
1	United States	57,742,980	72,559,980	130,302,960	25.72%	44..31%
2	Indonesia	16,200,160	11,016,320	27,216,480	5.37%	59..52%
3	United Kingdom	13,005,320	13,944,760	26,950,080	5.32%	48..26%
4	Turkey	14,432,520	8,054,980	22,487,500	4.44%	64.18%
5	France	9,148,020	9,847,740	18,995,760	3.75%	48.16%
6	Italy	9,005,780	7,736,820	16,742,600	3.30%	53.79%
7	Philippines	7,675,420	8,466,480	16,141,900	3.19%	47.55%
8	Canada	7,126,580	8,343,060	15,469,640	3.05%	46.07%
9	Mexico	7,306,080	74,369,480	14,742,560	2.91%	49.56%
10	India	9,082,660	3,914,100	12,996,760	2.57%	69.88%
11	Argentina	5,373,760	5,862,600	11,236,360	2.22%	47.82%
12	Spain	5,215,260	5,558,080	10,773,340	2.13%	48.41%
13	Germany	5,328,400	5,366,840	10,695,240	2.11%	49.82%
14	Colombia	5,210,720	5,468,620	10,679,340	2.11%	48.79%
15	Australia	4,259,980	4,984,020	9,244,000	1.82%	46.08%
16	Malaysia	4,208,300	3,856,320	8,064,620	1.59%	52.18%
17	Chile	3,451,000	3,714,280	7,165,280	1.41%	48.16%
18	Venezuela	3,259,480	3,738,720	6,998,200	1.38%	49.65%
19	Taiwan	3,472,420	3,520,620	6,992,040	1.38%	49.65%
20	Brazil	2,758,420	3,298,920	6,057,340	1.20%	45.54%
21	Thailand	2,253,120	2,832,340	5,085,460	1.00%	44.31%
22	Egypt	2,423,120	1,528,320	3,951,440	0.78%	61.32%
23	Sweden	1,846,740	1,989,540	3,836,280	0.76%	48.14%
24	Belgium	1,770,080	1,745,480	3,515,560	0.69%	50.35%
25	Hong Kong	1, 630,500	1,776,460	3,406,960	0.67%	47.86%

Figure 2—Top 25 Facebook Account Countries

difference in the demographics. Currently, Russia skews more towards female and the modal age (23) is higher than in the U.S. (The only major Facebook market that has a higher modal age than Russia is Spain).

In the next issue, I'll present some analysis of the breakdown of players in different games on Facebook. As a teaser, *Figure 7* shows a demographic breakdown of *Bejeweled Blitz* players on Facebook in the US. As you can see, this curve meshes nicely with our understanding of traditional casual game players, with a strong bias towards middle-aged females. Watch out though, there are quite a few surprises when you look at a breakdown of some of the other popular Facebook titles. . . . ■

Recent estimates indicate that two billion people in the world have access to the Internet, which suggests that Facebook now has a relationship with over 25% of the Internet-connected world.

Figure 4—Facebook Demographic Breakdown Indonesia

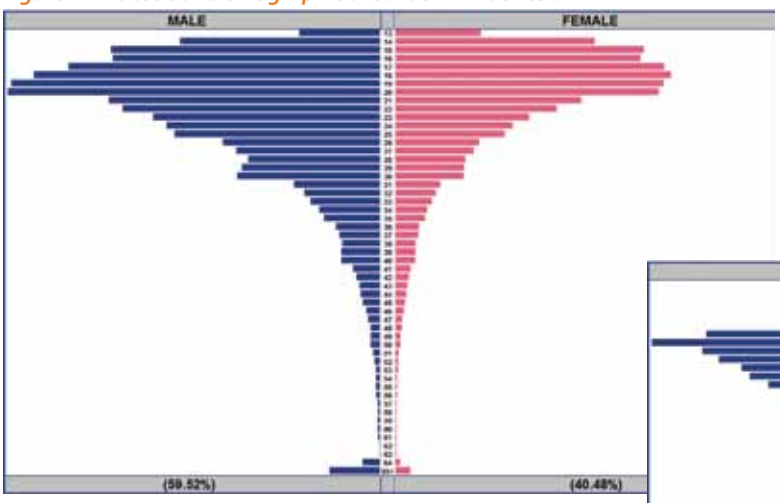


Figure 5—Facebook Demographic Breakdown India

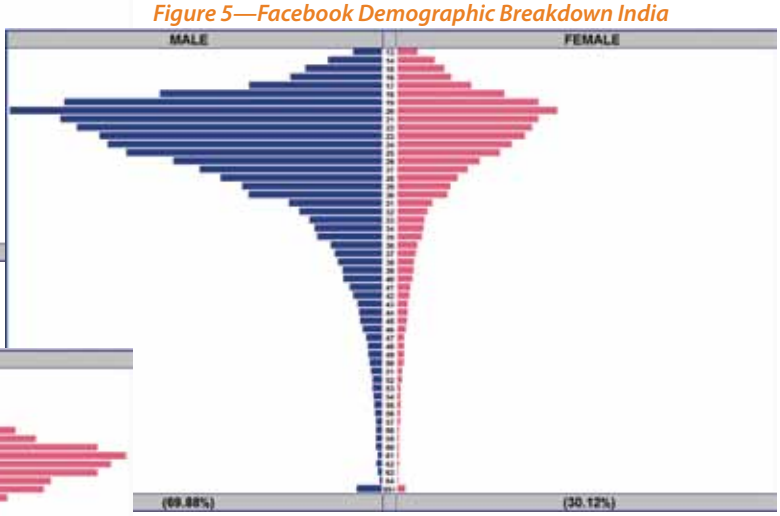


Figure 6—Facebook Demographic Breakdown Russian Federation

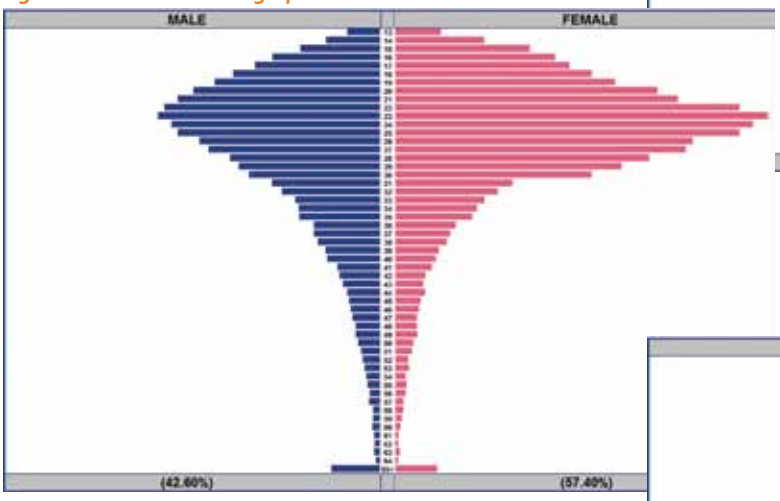


Figure 7—Facebook Demographic Breakdown Bejeweled Blitz *(USA)*

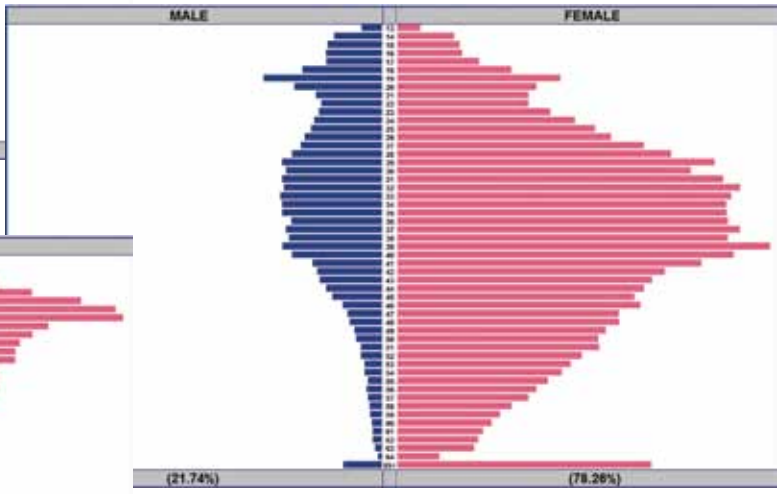
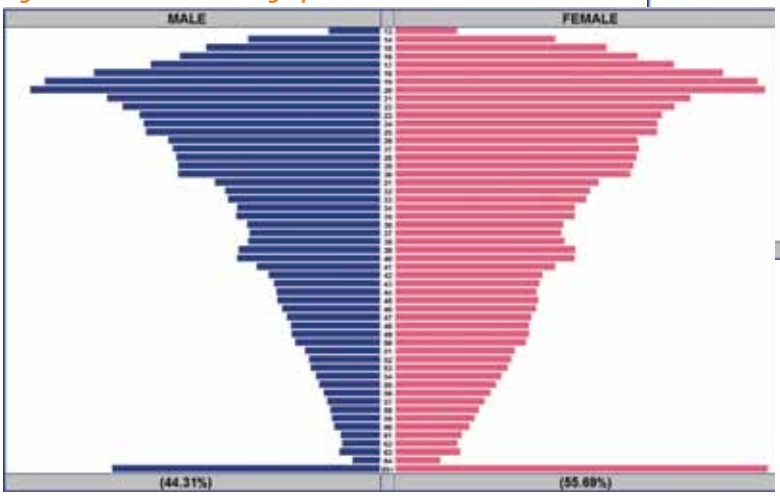


Figure 3—Facebook Demographic Breakdown USA



Winning the Ad Game

Effectively Leveraging Premium Advertising

by Christopher Cummings

Christopher Cummings leads product management for Lycos Inc.'s games division, including Gamesville.com and white label game solutions. Prior to joining Lycos, he served as senior product manager for GameLogic, Inc., where he oversaw gaming and customer acquisition solutions for land-based casinos in the United States and the United Kingdom. Christopher can be reached at chris.cummings@casualconnect.org

With the advent of virtual goods and lead generation in casual and social games, much of the monetization discussion has naturally focused on those two revenue sources. Meanwhile, many are all but ignoring one of the fastest-growing revenue streams: premium video advertising. Given the popularity of the ad format and the staggering amount of time casual gamers spend playing games, ignoring video advertising is tantamount to leaving money on the table.

Video advertising combines sound and motion with targeting and measurability, creating an online ad format that is acceptable to consumers while fulfilling the objectives of advertisers. Research firm eMarketer estimates that revenue from online video advertising will grow to $1.5 billion this year—a 48% increase over 2009—and is expected to surpass $5.5 billion by 2014[1]. That's tremendous growth potential tied to an ad format that is effective—and that casual gamers also appreciate.

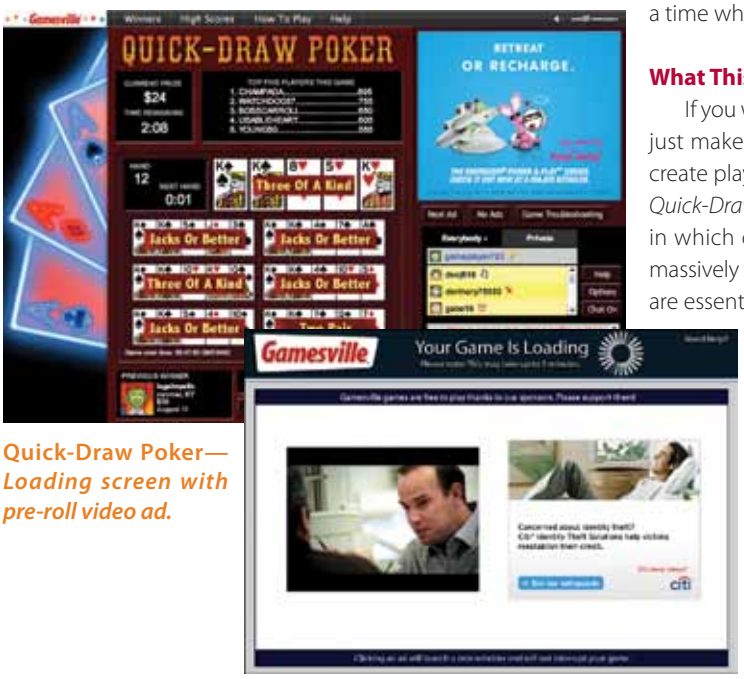
Results from a recent survey by Frank Magid Associates found that, when an advertiser runs a video ad with a game, its unaided brand awareness is five times higher than when it runs the same ad on television. Even more telling, over 80% could identify the advertiser who "allowed them to play the game for free," while 56% thought more highly of the advertiser because its ad enabled that free play session[2].

Indie developers and publishers have something big brands struggle to compete with: clearly defined target audiences.

What Video Ad Buyers Want

Generally speaking, video ad buyers are looking for pre-roll spots aimed at specific demographic or psychographic targets. Click-thru rate (CTR) is often the most critical performance metric, but branding metrics (such as awareness, purchase intent, and favorability) are starting to rise in importance. Given that many video ads are repurposed television commercials, the focus on branding is not especially surprising.

At the same time, "quality of inventory" is a very important consideration factor to ad buyers[3]. "Quality" in this context does not just apply to the overall aesthetic of the game with which the video ad will appear; it also applies to the brand of the site the game appears on, the content of the site, and the placement and targeting of the ad. In other words, ad buyers are looking for games for which consumers have a deep affinity, games with content that resonates with the brand or product/service being advertised, games which offer the best opportunity to reach consumers at a time when they're engaged and receptive to advertising.



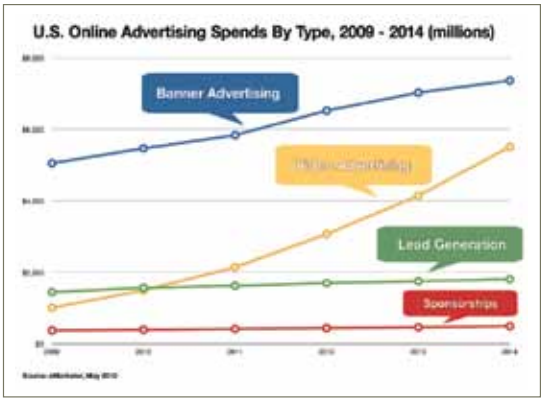
Quick-Draw Poker— ***Loading screen with pre-roll video ad.***

What This Means for Your Games

If you want to take advantage of premium advertising, you must do more than just make fun games that appeal to certain audience segments. You must also create play experiences that have natural ad breaks built into them. For example, *Quick-Draw Poker* at Gamesville.com is built around the concept of a game show in which contestants compete for free to win real cash prizes—a five-minute massively multiplayer experience with a defined beginning, middle, and end. Prizes are essentially paid for by advertisers, and their pre-roll video advertising appears before each round begins.

You might think of it this way: While a game is loading, you have the player's undivided attention, so taking advantage of that time and space for a pre-roll ad is one easy way to implement video advertising. If your title is level-based, video advertising might run between levels, functioning as a natural transition between one level and the next while maintaining the consumer's focus (since they're anticipating the next part of the experience).

Wherever the video ad is placed, it must be immediately visible and actionable; otherwise, it will go unnoticed, which doesn't help the ad buyer, the advertiser, or (ultimately) your bottom line.



How Can Indies Compete?

In advertising, size matters—but not always in the obvious ways. Big brands are attractive to ad buyers because they're known quantities with quality content. They often have robust offerings that serve broad audience segments with differing objectives. However, enjoying a lot of eyeballs does not necessarily translate into deeper engagement. In fact, that kind of environment can actually make it more difficult—and more costly—for advertisers to reach the right consumers at the right moment, because there's simply too much to wade through.

By contrast, indie developers and publishers who can offer relevant, engaging content along with high user frequency have something big brands struggle to compete with: clearly defined target audiences.

Understanding your audience—and being able to articulate your audience's value to advertisers—is critical. The first step toward understanding your audience is to capture and track usage statistics over time. Likely these stats include many of the same metrics most game developers are already tracking: Daily unique players, time spent, games played, etc. These statistics are critical because advertisers will want to know how many people will be viewing their ads and how engaged your audience is with the content being paired with advertising messages.

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story. In addition to the numbers driving their games, indies will want to better understand the audience of their games to ensure a good fit for the advertisers they want to work with. Through registration data and online surveys, any indie can ascertain the key demographic characteristics of their players and present advertisers with the big picture of their player base including age ranges, gender mix, geographic location, education, and income level.

These demographics reveal the external characteristics of your players. The deeper you drill, the more valuable the information may become. However, you also risk alienating players if you ask for too much – or too sensitive—information all at once. A good approach could be to tease certain information out of your players over time and to reward the players with points or other things of value for helping you build a richer, deeper audience profile.

You may also consider augmenting your audience data with psychographic information—that is, how people in your stated demographic classifications think and how they are likely to behave. What motivates them? Do they buy online? On impulse? Are they brand-loyal? If you can ascertain the answers to those kinds of questions, you might reveal something very important about your audience – perhaps even a valuable niche group that advertisers want to reach.

For example, suppose you don't have huge traffic numbers but you do have a highly engaged audience. That's a good start. Now suppose your research reveals that your game actually attracts the "Green Consumer" psychographic. Green Consumers are often characterized as educated early adopters who are not particularly price-sensitive and tend to be very brand loyal. They are an extremely desirable niche audience – the kind of audience many advertisers want to reach and will pay to reach.

Of course, big games and big publishers have access to something indies might not: A sales team with access to advertising agencies. If you're a standalone entity, that can be problem.

Fortunately, that's a solved problem.

Video Ad Networks

If your games have some scale and usage—and you have a firm grasp of your player demographics and psychographics—video ad networks can supply you with targeted, premium advertising. To be successful, your games must be a good fit by gender, by age, and by thematic relevance, and they must have the capability to reach the consumer in a meaningful way.

Which video ad network should you work with? It depends on your objectives, interests, and technical capabilities. Are you looking for reach—that is, for the ad network with the largest share of the total video viewing audience and, therefore, the largest number of potential advertisers to supply you with ads? Or are you looking for a certain kind of niche or brand marketer? For flexibility in terms of ad formats? What are your capabilities in terms of integrating feeds and ad tags?

If you're looking for reach, and if you have the capability to integrate ad providers and optimize for results, then you'll want to explore highly-trafficked video ad networks such as Tremor Media, BrightRoll, YuMe, Advertising.com, and Broadband Enterprises. Such networks offer a large number of potential advertisers that can supply you with ads.

One note of caution about shopping by reach alone: Inventory and reach can be obtained fairly inexpensively, making it possible for just about any agency or technology company to start an ad network and claim some impressive looking numbers. Closer scrutiny should be paid to the quality and type of audience they've amassed. For example, if you have a "Green" player base you probably don't want to work with an ad network whose clients are insensitive to green issues.

Many ad networks are trying to make it easier for their partners to access ad inventory by streamlining the process of integrating their ads into your games. If you're looking for publishing tools along with access to premium video ad inventory, you'll want to explore Adap.TV, Acudeo from Tremor, or SpotXchange. Adap.TV is particularly interesting because it also provides a robust, real-time marketplace that helps publishers capitalize on the increasing demand from buyers of online video.

Looking for premium content plus access to video ad inventory? Lycos offers a variety of white label solutions that can help you monetize your content and achieve your online video advertising objectives.

Don't Leave Money on the Table

Billions of dollars in premium advertising are looking for a new home—and casual games are perfectly poised to thrive in that kind of environment. Integrating video advertising into your revenue mix can help monetize your content while creating real value for both consumers and marketers. ■

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3. Online Video Ad Spending Delivering More Value to Agencies, MediaPost. May 2010

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